

# Not Really Here

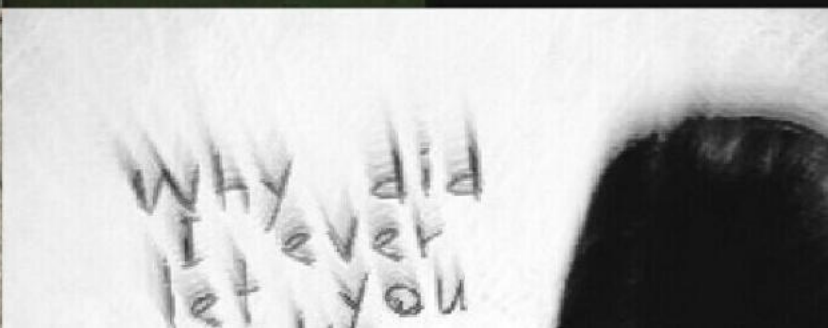
OwlsWithFins



Show no  
emotions.



I WISH  
WE COULD CHOOSE  
WHICH MEMORIES  
TO REMEMBER.



## Chapter 1

Severus tugged at his fingers as Dumbledore spoke, willing them to stop shaking, or, at the very least, to break into pieces. Then he might be able to return to the Hospital Wing and have Madam Pomfrey look over him again. She'd make sure Dumbledore stayed away until he was feeling better--until he started to feel like his body belonged to him again. Until he stopped wondering what might have happened if Potter hadn't stepped in to save him.

"...you understand the severity of the situation..."

His fingers didn't break, and they didn't stop shaking, but the way his skin blanched white and then faded to pink with each tug was grounding. Severus curled inward, hunching over his fingers until his whole world was made up of that gradient.

"...today's events must have been deeply upsetting for you. However..."

Severus glanced up at the Headmaster. Dumbledore didn't seem real. Neither did anything else. If Severus blinked too long, he'd find himself back in the Shack with a wolf charging at him. Not a wolf. A werewolf. Lupin.

"...I must guarantee your silence on what happened, as well as on Mr. Lupin's condition."

Severus scowled. Of course Dumbledore would pick the werewolf's side. Dumbledore was the one who let the beast in here after all. Kicking him out now would mean admitting he was wrong. It would mean telling the world one of his precious Gryffindors wasn't as pure as he made them all out to be. Severus didn't say anything, but he managed to nod jerkily. His body still didn't seem to be cooperating, just like it hadn't been earlier when Lupin came toward him and Severus froze. If Potter hadn't dragged him out of there...

Severus supposed his muscles and limbs were still thawing out. He chose that as an explanation for why he didn't notice Dumbledore casting a spell over him until he was tucking his wand away.

"What--"

"Not to worry, my boy. I'm just making sure Mr. Lupin's secret stays between Mr. Lupin and yourself." He had a twinkle in his eyes that was damn annoying, but Severus didn't have the mental capacity at the moment to figure out what it meant.

"If that's all..." he started, before shutting his jaw with a snap. He hated the way his voice sounded. It was nasally (it always was) but worse, it was wavering, like the words were being swallowed back into his chest as he voiced them.

Dumbledore nodded at him. "I know tonight's events may be difficult for you to handle. But remember: you are not alone, even if it may seem like it at first. Even if it seems like no one can see or hear you at all, help will find you. I suggest you accept it when it does."

Severus fought back a retort to the man's cryptic words and nodded once more before taking his leave.

He passed Black and Potter at the base of the stairs, but mercifully, they ignored him. A part of Severus wanted to believe they'd learned their lesson this time and would stop bothering him from now on, but he wasn't naive enough to think it would last. Before meeting with Dumbledore, Severus had assumed this would be the straw that finally got Black expelled, but the Headmaster



hadn't been particularly sympathetic toward Severus, so that was probably a lost cause as well. Severus doubted Gryffindor would even lose any points. Potter might actually convince Dumbledore to *give* points to Gryffindor for saving Severus' life--as if he was a saint instead of a rich boy who got afraid of the consequences of his actions too late. Severus didn't know which of the gang was involved in Black's "prank" but he couldn't fathom Potter being truly innocent.

As he made his way to Slytherin, he pondered the spell Dumbledore had cast, wondering what measures had been taken to keep Lupin's secret.

"Lupin is a werewolf," Severus tested under his breath. The words came out easily, and he didn't die on the spot. Perhaps it would only tie his tongue when there were listeners nearby. Or maybe the spell alerted Dumbledore when Severus said it. When Severus made it the rest of the way to the dungeons without the Headmaster appearing in a cloud of fire, he determined it wasn't that either. Maybe the whole spell was a fake to intimidate Severus into staying mum. Well, if that was the case, Severus would definitely be telling Lily tomorrow that his werewolf theory was correct after all. Then at least this horrible night would have accomplished part of what he intended--even if Dumbledore knew about Lupin after all and wouldn't expel him or his friends. Even if his small victory wouldn't be enough to make the nightmares worth it.

Severus crawled into bed, almost wishing one of his dormmates would wake up and chide him, if only to make the room feel a little less cold, a little less empty. As the night drew on, Severus listened for Avery's soft snores and Mulciber's mumbling breaths. They were too quiet, too quiet, too quiet, and the wolf was so loud. He would have given anything to block out the howls in his memory. His ears pulsed with the strain of trying to hear those gentle sleep sounds from too far away, and when he finally fell asleep, they escaped him entirely. In the thrall of his nightmares, only he and the wolf remained.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

The moment Remus woke up, he knew something was wrong.

The first sign was the pain--worse even than before the Marauders had started joining him in their Animagus forms. Remus' skin was on fire, and he stayed as still as he could while he surveyed his wounds without opening his eyes. His ribcage was tight--possibly bruised or partially broken. His face, neck, and chest stung, and Remus mentally filled in the new claw marks on his canvas of scars. He wondered how he would explain them away. When he only acquired a few prominent ones every now and then, he could pretend the cause was something benign, but if he returned to classes looking like a butchered slab of meat, he would raise more questions than he knew how to answer.

The second sign was the restlessness. Usually, after a full moon running with the Marauders, the wolf retreated for a while, sleepy and satisfied, like a warm embrace instead of an animal tearing at his skin from the inside. Now, it felt like the wolf was as present as Remus, still vying for control of the body they shared. Remus' muscles twitched and writhed against his bones, and nausea filled him at the sensation.

The third sign was that Sirius wasn't holding his hand. Remus could recognize the people in the room by scent--the Marauders and Madam Pomfrey easily broke through the sterile Hospital Wing smell--so he knew Sirius was there, but he wasn't touching him. Remus wondered if he'd torn his own arm off during the transformation. Maybe part of his pain belonged to a phantom limb. Or

maybe Remus had done something worse--hurt someone--and Sirius was repulsed by him, too horrified or disgusted to hold his hand. It was that thought that made Remus open his eyes.

The bright lights blinded him for a few moments, but when his vision cleared, he spotted Sirius, a step behind James, and Peter a few feet to the side.

“Moony,” Sirius breathed, fingers twitching as if they wanted to curl into a fist.

James shifted his foot further in front of Sirius, and Remus’ throat tightened at the thought that James was protecting Sirius from him. *Oh God, what had he done last night?*

“Good morning, Mr. Lupin,” Madam Pomfrey said, moving into view and blocking the Marauders. Her voice was as brisk and no-nonsense as ever, but there was pity in her eyes. Remus hoped it was because he looked like a corpse that would fall out of a cupboard in a Muggle horror movie and not because he had just become a murderer. “Drink this.” She tilted a potion to his lips, and he swallowed it down. The pungent taste forced a cough out of him, and it made his ribs scream in protest. Madam Pomfrey nodded in approval at his dutiful swallow. “That should help quicken the healing. Of course, you know by now that I can’t get rid of the scars, but with a week of rest, you should feel as good as new, even if you don’t look it.”

Relief shot through him at her words. Surely Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t tell him he’d be better in a week if they were planning to execute him in an hour. Remus tried to thank her, but his throat was still scratchy from the potion, and he ended up coughing again.

Madam Pomfrey grabbed a glass of water from her potions cart and tipped it into his mouth.

“...thank you,” Remus managed when he had finished.

“You’re very welcome, Mr. Lupin. I’ll let you have a few minutes with your friends, but then I’ll be kicking everyone out so you can get some sleep.” She eyed the Marauders sternly. “That’s the best thing for you right now.”

Remus managed a small smile, and she smiled back before leaving the room. Remus’ jaw clenched with worry now that he was alone with his friends, but he forced his eyes to flick toward them. “So,” he said with as much strength as he could muster, “is someone going to tell me what the hell happened last night?”

Sirius opened his mouth to answer, but James cut him off with a look.

“Everyone is fine, Remus,” James said. “You didn’t hurt anyone.”

Remus studied his eyes for a tell, but something in his voice made Remus sure he wasn’t lying, despite Remus’ own doubts. Still, he couldn’t relax. If James was speaking the truth, then there was something else. “I almost did,” Remus said with as much certainty as he could have with so little memory of the night before.

James hesitated, then nodded.

“Sirius?” Remus guessed, unable to tear his eyes from the floor where James’ foot was still separating them protectively.

“What? Moony, no. You didn’t try to hurt me. I...” Remus glanced up at the pain in his friend’s voice. Sirius swallowed. “I tried to let you hurt someone else.”

Remus felt his mouth go dry. “You...who? Why?”



"Snivellus," James muttered. "Padfoot thought it was a good idea to tell him how to get past the Whomping Willow."

Remus' eyes burned with unshed tears. He shook his head, again and again until he thought it might rattle onto the floor. "No."

"James rescued him though," Peter added, shifting on his feet with discomfort.

"No," Remus said again. "You wouldn't. I can't believe--"

"I'm sorry, Moony," Sirius said, and it was his tone, tortured and broken, that finally cut through Remus' denial.

Remus closed his eyes. He couldn't look at him. He couldn't listen to his apologies. "Get out."

"Moons..."

"*Get out!*" he snapped, and he knew the wolf slipped into his voice because he could feel the growl rumbling in his chest. Remus didn't look up, afraid his eyes might be golden and wolflike. He heard a shuffling sound, and then the door opened and closed. Remus took several deep breaths, but they only grew more shallow the more he tried not to panic.

"Is he really okay?" Remus choked out after a few fruitless minutes of this.

There was silence for a moment as if James and Peter didn't know what to make of his words.

"Yeah," James said finally. "Snape is okay. I got to him before..."

Remus nodded, unable to speak. When his breathing slowed enough to form words, he asked, "Did he see your Animagus form?"

James softened at his friend's concern. "No, he didn't. I pushed him out of the tunnel and then transformed. I, uh, might have broken a few of your ribs trying to drive you back into the Shack though. Sorry."

"Thank you," Remus whispered, and suddenly he was too tired to deal with anything else. He didn't know what time it was, but since Madam Pomfrey wasn't rushing the Marauders off to class, Remus assumed it was still early. He could sleep for a few hours, and then he would sneak out when Madam Pomfrey wasn't looking and check on Snape. He wouldn't be able to breathe normally until then. "Can you leave please?" Remus told them, not looking up. "I'm tired."

"Course, Moony, whatever you need."

"We'll come back to check on you at lunch," Peter piped in uncertainly, "That is, if you want us to."

Remus nodded once, even though he wasn't sure he wanted that. He wasn't sure he wanted to see another human being for the rest of his life. Maybe it would be better if they locked him up in Azkaban. At least he wouldn't have to worry about hurting the dementors. He wondered nonsensically if they could be friends--if the dark creature in him might find solace in the darkness in them.

James and Peter's soft footsteps were the last sounds Remus heard before drifting off to sleep.

When Severus awoke, he felt like Potter had let a snitch loose in his skull. The memory of sharp teeth and wolf howls kept him up most of the night, and when he did sleep, the nightmares kept it from being restful.

Avery and Mulciber were already rummaging around the room, and Severus stared at the ceiling, dreading the day ahead. Being late to class, however, would only sour his mood further, so he reluctantly pulled back his bed curtains.

Avery glanced up sharply at the movement before turning to Mulciber. "Did you do that?"

"Did I do what?" Mulciber's voice was gruff like it always was in the mornings, and Severus was too exhausted to remind himself not to find it appealing.

"Open Snape's curtains."

Severus furrowed his brows, wondering if he should just go back to bed. His temporary inability to make sense of the English language would make going to classes irrelevant.

"Avery, why in Merlin's name would I do that?"

"More importantly," Severus said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes to make room for his bewilderment, "what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I dunno, Mulc, but they were closed a second ago, and now they're open," Avery said, shaking his head like maybe he was seeing things. "And Snape isn't here, so I guessed it was you."

Severus blinked. It seemed Avery's problem wasn't 'seeing things' but rather 'not seeing things'. 'Things' being Severus. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I am very much here."

Avery didn't look at him. Instead, he shook his head. "Never mind. I guess I imagined it."

Mulciber eyed Avery warily as he finished dressing. "Come on then, let's get to breakfast. You can go crazy after we've eaten."

Avery nodded and followed him out the door.

Severus blinked again. Was that...a joke? It didn't sound like one. If they were joking, surely they would have made rude comments about him or something, because moving curtains weren't very funny. But if it wasn't a joke...

...then they really couldn't see--or hear--Severus. And if that was true, it was almost too much to contemplate. Was he dead? Had he pulled a Professor Binns and continued on with his routine as if he was still among the living? Severus was going to haunt Lupin to the grave if he had killed him last night.

But then, if he was a ghost, Avery and Mulciber would still have been able to see and hear him. He just would have been transparent. At least, he thought that was how it worked. Were there different levels of ghostliness?

His stomach grumbled, and he decided breakfast was a necessary precursor to questioning his existence. He pulled on his robes and grabbed his bag, not bothering to clean himself up. He'd look



like shit either way, and when it came to his appearance, at the moment he was more worried about whether or not he had one at all.

Severus grew more and more nervous the nearer he came to the Great Hall as he passed more and more people who didn't notice him. He reminded himself that most of those people didn't notice him on a normal day, but his paranoia was making it harder to believe it. He started humming, hoping to draw someone's--anyone's--attention, even if it meant ruining his reputation or getting teased. "Killer Queen" buzzed out through his nose, but still, no one looked his way.

Finally, a few feet from the doors, Severus spotted a head of red hair.

"Lily!"

She didn't turn around. Severus sped up, ducking around people until he was right behind her.

"LILY!"

She didn't turn around.

Severus felt his stomach drop, and his knees started to shake.

She didn't turn around.

She didn't fucking turn around.

*Oh, God.* No one could see him. No one could hear him. He wasn't even a ghost, he was something worse than that. Fuck fuck *fuck*. Severus knew he was hyperventilating, but he couldn't get his breathing under control.

*If a student faints in the hallway and there's no one who can see him, does he really make a sound?*

Black spots danced across his vision. Severus closed his eyes to make them stop, but that only caused him to lose his balance.

"Snape!" he heard from a few feet behind him. He tried to open his eyes to see who the speaker was, but instead, he fell toward them, and his vision went black.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Snape tried to scream when he woke, but Remus covered his mouth with his hand. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you." Remus released Snape when he saw the panic in his eyes, and a wave of guilt washed over him. "You fainted, so I carried you here."

Snape scuttled away as fast as he could. He wiped his sleeve across his mouth, and his features twisted up, making it clear he was wondering where else Remus had touched him so he could scrub there too.

Remus had brought him to the nearest unlocked room he could find which turned out to be an empty classroom. He knew he should have taken Snape to the Hospital Wing, but he didn't want Madam Pomfrey to put him back in his room before he could make sure Snape was okay. Not to mention, Remus was embarrassingly weak after the full moon, and it was hard enough on his

wounds to drag himself that distance, not to mention another person. He wondered how many stitches he'd torn already. Madam Pomfrey was going to kill him when he returned to her care--or at least tut at him very severely.

When Snape gathered his bearings, he scooted even further away until he backed up against a desk. "Stay away from me, you mutt."

Remus winced, but he deserved that after what Snape had gone through. After what Remus had unknowingly put him through. "I won't come any closer," Remus said, "and I'll leave you alone forever after this if you'd like. I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry for what happened last night. I had no idea what Sirius was planning, and if I'd known, I would have done anything I could to stop it. I never would have intentionally..." Remus trailed off, too horrified by the possibility to finish. "I don't even know what I would have done if I had hurt you."

"You wouldn't have done anything," Snape hissed. "The Ministry would have had you executed." Remus heard the silent *'which they should have done anyway.'*

"I would have deserved it," Remus agreed. He had been considering going to the Ministry and coming clean about his condition all morning. He still hadn't decided. Perhaps Snape would do him a favor and just tell everyone about him. Then Remus wouldn't have to make the decision. "Anyway, I'm sorry for coming to find you. I know it must be revolting to be around me after what you saw. I just--I had to see with my own eyes that you're okay." Some sort of realization flickered in Snape's eyes, but Remus didn't know what he said to cause it. "I know you don't believe me, but...I really am sorry."

"Of course you are," Snape sneered. "And after this, you'll go back and have a laugh about it with your boyfriend."

Remus stared. "What?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "You can claim innocence as much as you like, Lupin. I don't buy it."

"I--" Remus felt his face go red. He hated it when that happened because it made his scars stand out stark white against the flush. It was worse now that Snape knew what had caused them. "No, not that. I um, *boyfriend?*"

"Black," Snape said, like Remus was the one who was out of his mind. Remus wondered if his jaw was hanging open. He thought it might be. Snape's face contorted in response. "It was a joke, Lupin. Calm down."

Remus closed his mouth, which he supposed meant it must have been open. He felt exposed. Surely Snape hadn't noticed that Remus--

Remus brushed the thought aside. Snape himself had just said it was a joke. It didn't mean anything. Instead, Remus grounded himself in reality by thinking about what Sirius had done. He kept having to remind himself because it still didn't feel real. Remus had trusted Sirius. Remus had thought Sirius cared for him. But after last night...well, he must have been wrong. No one could do that to someone they loved. "Right. Well. Sirius and I aren't speaking at the moment. So."

Snape studied him. "How terrible for you."

"I wasn't looking for sympathy." Remus wasn't sure how to make Snape understand that he was truly sorry, but suddenly it seemed like the most important task in the world.

Snape continued to stare, and for a moment, Remus thought he might have gotten through to him.



But then a muscle in Snape's jaw twitched, and he looked away. "Well, whatever you're looking for, you can forget it," Snape snarled, picking himself up off the floor. "I don't owe you anything."

Before Remus could think of a reason to make him stay, he was out the door.

## Chapter 2

Severus was invisible. Inaudible. Imperceivable.

When Lupin came to talk to him, he momentarily forgot about his predicament because he was in the presence of the *werewolf* who had nearly *killed* him, but then Lupin had said, *I had to see with my own eyes that you're okay*, and it hit Severus that Lupin could *see* him. At first, Severus had felt relief that his concerns were unfounded, but attending his first few classes of the day proved otherwise. The next two days only confirmed his fears.

He was ignored, even when he spoke to someone directly. People looked *through* him instead of at him--professors, too. After spending the last fifteen years of his life wishing people would leave him alone, he was horrified to find his wish had come true. Even more so since Lupin seemed to be the only exception. What hellscape had he walked into where Lupin was exempt, not only from the school's no werewolf policy, but also from Severus' cosmic punishment?

Severus brainstormed reasons for his own disappearance throughout his classes that first day. He didn't want to get behind in any of his subjects in case he reappeared in time to take his O.W.L.s, but his thoughts trailed back to that oh so important dilemma in every spare moment. And there was only so much he could do in classes when no one knew he was there.

He spent much of Transfiguration successfully performing the Switching Spell on James Potter's glasses and a slug Severus had taken to keeping as a pet. Even after several rounds of this, no one had commented on the presence of a mysterious, invisible, transfiguring entity--including Potter--but Potter had switched from high pitched screaming to trying to bat the slug from his face, so Severus decided to stop. He had found the slug a week before while harvesting potions ingredients for his personal collection, and he quite liked having him around and intact.

History of Magic was his second class of the day, and that was when he had the most time to brainstorm. He'd read the textbook front to back three times during the last few months, so he knew he wouldn't miss anything. By the end of class, his list of explanations for his condition was short, but he figured it was a good start.

Reason 1: Severus was dead, and he was stuck in some sort of purgatory instead of becoming a ghost or moving on. And somehow Lupin was here too? Perhaps he *was* executed after all, if Severus was killed in the shack.

Reason 2: Severus had been struck by an unknown dark curse and Lupin alone could see him since he was a dark creature.

Reason 3: There was no magic involved and everyone was playing a game where they pretended Severus wasn't there, only Lupin hadn't heard about it because he was in the Hospital Wing recovering from the full moon.

Severus sighed. Even with how fast information spread at Hogwarts, there was no way everyone could get on board with the plan in Reason 3 so quickly. Severus had lived with these idiots for years now, and he knew their acting wasn't that good. Surely the professors, at least, wouldn't agree to that.

To evaluate Reason 1, Severus would need to learn more about ghosts and the afterlife. He decided that would be his focus over the next few days. Although Reason 2 seemed the most promising, it would also require more research since it was easier to prove he wasn't a ghost than to find some obscure curse that specifically applied to him. Severus liked Reason 2 best, however, because it suggested his problem was temporary, and that made him anxious to rule out Reason 1 as quickly as possible.

When class ended, Severus hurried to the library instead of to the Great Hall for lunch. He spent the entire break picking out the most promising titles and jotting them down. He wanted to pick a few to start with and then keep the rest in a list for future perusal in case his first tries proved unsuccessful. By the time the other students were funneling out of the library to get to their next classes on time, Severus had almost sorted through all of the applicable shelves. He decided to finish before heading to class. Charms with Professor Flitwick was something he didn't want to miss, but this was more important. And Flitwick would count Severus absent whether he attended or not, so if he grabbed some library books and then showed up late, no one would know but Severus.

Once he had sorted his chosen titles into a meticulously ordered list, he stuffed the first three books into his bag and made his way out of the library. It felt wrong not to check them out, but he figured there was nothing for it. Of all his problems, borrowing library books without following protocol should be the least of his worries.

As he walked through the halls, he felt twitchy--even more so than usual--as if he was flickering in and out of existence with each step. The people he passed who had an off-hour during this time didn't seem to notice a flickering apparition, so he guessed it was in his head. When Potter and Black walked by, Severus hunched further out of habit.

"...won't talk to me," Black was saying. "I know I fucked up. *Merlin*, I know. But he won't let me apologize, and it's killing me."

*So Lupin was telling the truth*, Severus thought. Intrigued, Severus turned on his heel and followed them. He straightened a little when he remembered they couldn't see him. At least there was a small silver lining in all of this. Severus would have snorted at how pathetic that was if he wasn't so intent on hearing what was said next.

"Give him time, Pads," Potter said, but there was a reservation to his sympathy. Almost as if he, too, had a grudge against Black for what he'd done.



Severus scowled at the thought. It was far more likely that Black had been whining for hours and Potter was simply tired of hearing it. That conjecture made it possible for Severus to continue to think Potter equally culpable in the incident. If Potter was upset with Black for the “prank,” then he would have to be innocent. And if he was innocent...well, that was just too implausible for Severus to believe. He’d have to completely reconsider Potter’s character, and Severus had enough on his plate already. Like the fact that he might be dead.

“If I could just explain--” Black started, but Potter cut him off.

“Knock it off, Sirius. There’s nothing to explain.” He had spun on Black, a glare in his eyes, but it softened with his next words. “You’re going through a lot. I get that, and I’m here for you if you need to talk or play a round of one-on-one Quidditch to let off some steam. But there is nothing you can tell Remus that will explain how you could betray his trust like that--how you could try to use him as a *murder* weapon. Alright?”

Severus stared at Potter in surprise. It was starting to look like Severus’ original assumption was incorrect and that Potter wasn’t involved after all.

Unless they, like Remus, could see Severus, and they were doing this for his benefit.

Reason 4: Black, Potter, and possibly that short boy who followed them around were fucking with Severus.

They certainly had the magical skill to accomplish it, as loathe as Severus was to admit it. And they were the only people Severus could think of who had the talent plus the motive. It was a bizarre trick if that’s really all this was, but everything about Black and Potter was bizarre, so bizarreness certainly didn’t rule it out. Severus hunched again unconsciously as he waited to hear Black’s reply.

Black looked like he wanted to fight Potter, but he deflated instead. Severus had never seen him without an arrogant tilt to his lips or a mocking sneer. If Severus had been capable of making sounds other people could hear, he would have told Black exactly how pitiful he looked. Instead, he studied the regret on Black’s face, willing it to flicker into something more familiar.

“I know there’s no excuse. I just--” Black squeezed his fingers into fists, and Severus flinched, worried this was the moment the prank would reveal itself. But then his fingers uncurled. “I just can’t bear the thought of him hating me forever.”

Potter squeezed his shoulder. “I know, Pads.” There was no encouragement of ‘he’ll come around soon,’ and the silence was heavy with its absence. A few seconds later, they resumed their walk. Severus chose not to follow them. He had Charms class to attend and research to do. And if his research didn’t offer any solutions, he’d have more than enough time to spy on Potter and Black later. Severus swallowed at the idea of being stuck like this forever. While there were some lovely perks to possibly-not-being-alive, Severus knew it was going to get old very fast. He’d just have to figure out some answers before then.

Over the next two days, Severus woke up, ate in the Great Hall, went to classes, did research in the library, and went to sleep, but to everyone else, it was like he wasn’t even there. Avery continued to glance warily at Severus’ bed from time to time, and whenever he did, Severus wiggled his curtains or threw things to make him notice his presence. Somehow, the timing was always wrong. Either Severus would react a moment too late or Avery would widen his eyes and then shake his head, pushing the apparent hallucination from his mind. As confusing and terrifying as it must have

been for Avery, it sent a wave of relief through Severus each time Avery noticed something peculiar. If Severus was still affecting this reality, then at least to some degree, he was really here.

Classes were...classes. Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts were easy enough to learn just by paying attention, taking notes, and practicing the incantations after class (or sometimes during class in the hopes that someone would realize he was responsible). (They didn't).

In Potions, there was an open seat next to Potter--the spot where Lupin usually sat--but Severus decided that, even invisible, he would rather not get that close. The mere thought made his fingers twitch. Instead, he wandered up and down the rows of desks, making note of the color and smell of each cauldron's contents, the step at which each student went wrong, and whether or not he liked the person. More often than not, he did not like them, but for a couple of students (Avery and Mulciber), he tossed in a few extra ingredients he thought might help and noted the effects. For other students (who need not be named), Severus added some less helpful ingredients, and if he laughed when the concoction exploded on their revered black hair, well, no one could hear him.

Lily was the only student who was doing fine on her own, and Severus nodded in satisfaction as he studied her cauldron. She was usually paired with Severus, but MacDonald was at her side today. He watched them for as long as he could, making note of where the textbook instructions led Lily astray, but after a few minutes, it became too painful, and he had to move on. Severus felt like someone had switched the contents of his stomach with the sizzling remains of Potter and Black's potions. It was one thing to know he couldn't talk to Lily, but it was another to see how easily he was replaced. Had she even wondered why Severus wasn't in class? Had she stopped to consider why he hadn't been at breakfast, lunch, or dinner? Was she worried? Did she miss him?

Severus certainly missed Lily. He wanted to tell her everything that had happened over the past few days. He wanted her to distract him from this mess by talking about her day. He wanted her to smile at him.

Why couldn't Lily have been the exception instead of Lupin? Or Avery or Mulciber? Or *anyone* but one of the four students who made it their life goal to make Severus miserable? Anyone but the monster who nearly killed him--who might have even *succeeded* in killing him, if Severus truly was dead?

Severus kept his anger and frustration at the front of his mind as he went through another day of Transfiguration and History of Magic and Charms and Not Existing. Severus held onto his rage, because in the moments where his rage let up, he felt so alone that he almost wished Lupin would recover soon, if only so he could be certain that someone could see him. Severus hated himself for how frequently those moments arose, and sometimes his self-loathing worked almost as well as the rage. He supposed it was better than thinking about Lily.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

When Remus walked into the Potions classroom on his first day back, he felt like an animated corpse. His skull was pounding, and his skin burned everywhere. The wolf hadn't ripped him up this badly since his first transformation at Hogwarts when the change of scenery from his family's basement to the Shrieking Shack sent him into a vicious fit. The fact that Remus had jumped out of bed the minute Madam Pomfrey stepped out of the room in order to check on Snape didn't help matters much.

The pounding in his head worsened when he realized he had to pick a place to sit. His usual spot next to James was open, but he didn't want to talk to James. The other Marauders were just a reminder that Remus let his secret get out. And it almost cost Snape his life.

Remus shivered and decided he couldn't deal with them today. Turning his gaze downward to avoid meeting James' eyes, he sat in the nearest open seat and started pulling out his books before he could talk himself out of it.

"Hello," he greeted. His voice was quiet as if somehow that made him less intrusive. He could feel James' hurt expression pointed his way, but he didn't look up, speaking to his new partner instead. "I hope it's okay for me to sit here."

The words were met with silence, and when Remus looked up to find out why, the air went out of his lungs.

Severus Snape was staring at Remus, recoiled and in shock like he couldn't believe Remus had the nerve to come near him. Remus couldn't believe it either. How could he be so thoughtless? He had promised to stay away. He had promised Snape would never have to deal with him again after what Remus put him through, and then he had gone and broken that promise the moment he got out of the Hospital Wing. Remus knew he should get up and switch to another seat, but he couldn't move, too repulsed by his own mistake to claim responsibility for his body.

Snape didn't yell at him to get away, but the muscles in his neck, jaw, lip, and hands were tight with tension--like he might snap at the slightest movement. Remus couldn't resist meeting his eyes, wondering if he would find disgust, fear, hatred, or all of the above. Instead, they were nearly unreadable. Remus could see the calculation in them, however--a kind of hesitance. Which was...odd. Unexpected. Good, probably, but Remus was too surprised to decide one way or another right now. His surprise turned to disbelief when Snape said, "It's fine," without unclenching his teeth.

Remus' jaw dropped. After spending several seconds trying to decide if he was hearing things, Remus managed an uncertain, "thank you." And he was thankful. Confused and surprised, yes, but also thankful. Remus knew this gratitude was probably causing his whole body to glow because Snape looked like he wanted to take it back. Remus couldn't help it though. The idea that Snape might not hate him--might not be *disgusted* by him--after last night? It was more than Remus had dared hope for. Not that Snape would be wrong to believe the worst of him-- *Remus* did, after all--but still, it was nice to know that someone had seen him at his most monstrous and could still sit beside him without screaming or cowering or desperately wracking their brain to remember all the ways to kill a werewolf. The other Marauders had seen him during a full moon too, but they saw a softer version because they had their Animagus forms. Snape, on the other hand...

Snape had seen him at his most bloodthirsty. The more Remus thought about it, the more astonished he was at this behavior. He admired the courage it must have taken to let him sit there--even if Snape should have trusted his original instincts and run far, far away.

"Stop staring at me," Snape hissed, ducking his head.

Remus looked away quickly. "Sorry. I zoned out for a moment."

Snape made a small noise of acknowledgment and turned his attention back to the board so he could copy down the instructions. Remus followed suit. Snape was excellent at Potions, and since he was forgiving enough to let Remus be his partner, Remus didn't want to bollocks it up.

"Mr. Potter," Slughorn said as he passed his desk, "is there a reason you're working alone?"



James' gaze flitted back toward Remus for a split second before putting on his teacher's pet mask. "I think I'm coming down with something, sir, and I didn't want Remus to catch it so I suggested I work alone."

Remus felt guilt rush through him. James hadn't done anything wrong, and now he was lying for Remus. *That's nothing new. He's been lying for you for years. Think about how much easier things would be for him without you.*

"Lupin," Snape said, not looking up from his parchment. "Make yourself useful and go grab the supplies."

"Right." Remus checked the ingredients once more and made his way over to the supply closet. Once his arms were full, he turned to go back to his seat. James was waiting at the closet door, vibrating like it took physical effort to give Remus his space. *You're hurting him. Even by trying not to hurt anyone again, you're causing pain to the people you love.* Remus hadn't yet decided if he should leave Hogwarts, but thoughts like those made him confident it was the right choice. He ducked his head and slipped past James without a word.

When Remus returned to his desk, Snape had already set up their cauldron. They didn't speak, and Remus didn't do anything but hand Snape ingredients and copy the instructions from the board, but Remus didn't mind. It was better than having James shoot him sympathetic looks when he thought Remus wasn't looking, in between mouthing things to Sirius. James was still shooting him sympathetic looks, but it was from far enough away that Remus could ignore it. Mostly.

The potion was a third of the way finished when Snape finally spoke. "Has Potter...said anything about me?" His voice was monotone like he was struggling to keep it from wavering. "Since...you know."

Remus frowned. "No, he hasn't. Why do you ask?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "I'm just surprised he isn't bragging to the whole world that he..." Snape ground his jaw, "...saved me."

"Oh." Remus didn't think James would risk his secret like that, but Snape didn't know him like Remus did. Then again, Remus had thought the same of Sirius and been wrong. He swallowed. "Well, admittedly, I haven't really been speaking to him either."

"Giving both Potter and Black the silent treatment," Snape drawled. There was a hint of amusement to his voice that Remus couldn't define. "That explains why you resorted to sitting next to me."

"Er, yes." Remus was pleased that Snape didn't sound upset about Remus sitting next to him, but he wondered why the Slytherin was alone in the first place. Were he and Lily having a row? Or did he usually sit alone and Remus had never noticed? Lily was at a table by herself today which was strange in and of itself, but the fact that James hadn't taken the opportunity to sidle up next to her made Remus wonder if the whole world had gone mad while he was in the Hospital Wing.

"So Potter was involved?" Snape said, tearing Remus from his thoughts. He was wearing a carefully neutral expression like he was trying hard to appear casual.

"What?"

"I was just wondering why you aren't speaking to Potter. I figured that meant he was involved in the 'prank' as well. Unless you came to your senses on your own terms and realized you're better

off without them.”

Remus glanced at him curiously. Snape was fastidiously cutting whatever root they were meant to add next, so he didn’t notice. “You’re rather talkative today.”

Snape flinched, and his gaze darkened.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” Remus added hurriedly. “I just expected you to ignore me the whole class.”

Snape relaxed a bit but didn’t look up from his work. He dropped in the chopped pieces one at a time and then gave the potion five stirs. Remus knew he had copied down the notes from the board, but he must have done it without really thinking about it because he couldn’t for the life of him remember what they were making. Snape seemed content with it, however, so Remus was sure it was coming along perfectly.

Realizing Snape was not going to say anything more without prompting, Remus said, “You’re really good at this.”

“Yes,” he replied shortly.

Remus’ lips twitched. He couldn’t tell if Snape was trying not to be talkative after Remus’ accidental reprimand or if he thought a simple confirmation was all that was required of him. Remus, however, wanted to know more, like where he learned his technique. “Did you learn from your father? Or—”

Before Remus could finish the question, the cauldron went over the edge of their desk, its contents splattering Alice’s heels. Remus looked over at Snape. He was pale and trembling and staring at the place the potion used to be.

“Mr. Lupin,” Slughorn called out. “Detention tomorrow evening in my office for improper handling of dangerous substances.” Remus nodded, still dazed from the sudden commotion. Slughorn walked up to them. “Sorry to be so harsh, my boy. I know this is a difficult time for you.”

Remus gaped. Snape knew about his condition, but Slughorn didn’t know that, did he? Why was he being so cavalier with Remus’ secret?

“However, a lack of caution can be very dangerous, and I can’t let it happen again. You are dismissed for the day, and I expect an essay on how to avoid mistakes like this in the future by tomorrow night.”

Remus nodded again, unable to make his mouth move.

Slughorn gave him a pat on the shoulder and turned to Alice, who was slightly green as she surveyed the damage to her calves. “Mr. Longbottom, please escort your partner to the Hospital Wing. The rest of you, carry on.”

Remus gathered his things, confused about why Snape hadn’t been addressed at all. Would he leave the classroom with Remus? Or join another table? Why hadn’t he fessed up that the spill had been his fault?

But before Remus could ask him anything, Snape had packed up his supplies and slipped out the door.

Severus shouldn't have panicked like that. An embarrassment of that caliber, even in front of someone like Lupin, made his stomach turn. He didn't know why he'd reacted that way. He had been on-edge about being so close to Black and Potter since he still wasn't sure if they could see him, and he kept switching between fear of Lupin and relief at having someone to talk to after days of being ignored, and he kept waiting for Slughorn to realize Lupin wasn't working alone and start asking questions.

Even though it would probably be easier to figure things out if he had an ally, Severus couldn't make himself tell Lupin about his...situation. Lupin probably wouldn't be his ally anyway, and there was a chance he was in on it already if Black and Potter were involved. Beyond that, Severus wanted time to work things out on his own and think tactically about how to proceed. He didn't want the secret to be spilled in the middle of Potions class in front of everyone. Lupin was bad enough at keeping his own secrets. He'd surely tell the whole class that Severus was invisible, and Slughorn would think Lupin was crazy, and then the one person who could see and hear Severus would get sent to St Mungo's, and Severus would be truly alone. Severus' chest tightened at the thought. No, it was good that Lupin didn't know yet. He would find out eventually, of course, but this would give Severus time to draw some conclusions himself first.

So Severus was tense about Black and Potter, anxious about Slughorn, and uncertain how to communicate with his almost murderer. Even so, none of those things excused his reaction. He'd dealt with questions about his parents before, usually by changing the subject, or discussing his mother's Prince heritage until the other person lost interest. Talking about his father—even *thinking* about his father--was not something he liked to do. But he usually didn't panic like that.

Although he still didn't have an explanation, the further he got from the Potions classroom, the less important it seemed. After all, what would Lupin do with the information anyway? Tell the members of his house that Severus had some sort of father complex? That didn't seem like something Lupin would do, but more importantly, to everyone but Lupin (and possibly Potter and Black) Severus didn't exist. What did it matter what anyone knew if Severus wasn't really here?

It was getting difficult to sort through his priorities since that tiny little detail managed to outweigh them all.

Lily was definitely somewhere near the top of his list of problems. It was annoying that no one could see him, but it was distressing that Lily couldn't. He'd received an owl from her earlier today—in the library of all places (perhaps the bird had had trouble finding him?)—but the minute he recognized the handwriting, he had folded the letter away to deal with later. He wanted to have time to write back a detailed response, and he knew he'd be drafting a letter in his head instead of paying attention during Potions if he read it first.

Walking quickly since Lupin had likely left the classroom soon after him, Severus made his way to the library. He had been avoiding the Slytherin common room lately because it was harder to Not Exist around people he knew. Strangers were easier.

As he passed the librarian's desk, Severus made a face, but she didn't notice. Another person for whom he was invisible. He wondered if maybe he should be keeping a written record of his mini-experiments.



Once he was settled at a table, Severus pulled the letter out of his pocket and unfolded it with care.

*Sev,*

*What happened last night? I overheard Black and Potter talking in hushed tones this morning, and when you didn't show up for breakfast, I got worried. I even asked Avery and Mulciber if they'd seen you (and you know how I feel about them), but they said you didn't sleep in your bed last night. By then, I was really stressed, so I cashed in a favor with Slughorn. All he told me is that something happened where Potter had to save your life? The strangest part is that I think he was talking about James Potter. You know, ye high, rich pureblood, bullying toerag? That James Potter. Which is ludicrous, of course. But the part that is most baffling of all is the **YOU DISAPPEARED AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN LEAVE ME A NOTE**. I'm hoping there's a reasonable explanation for all of this, and that you just forgot to write to me in all the chaos, but if you left Hogwarts without telling me, we will be having words, and they will not be nice words.*

*Your (irate) (and worried) friend,*

*Lily*

*P.S. I'm really glad you're alive, even if I can't wrap my head around Potter being the one responsible.*

Severus choked back a sob as he stared at her words. For the first time since that night, it felt like maybe his world wasn't ending. Lily hadn't forgotten about him. The letter was dated from two days ago which meant Lily had noticed his absence immediately. With that knowledge settled inside his ribcage, the tightness in his lungs eased and warmth spread through him. He would write Lily and tell her everything that happened, and she'd figure out a way to fix it. This would all be over soon.

*Dear Lily,*

*Unfortunately, what you heard is true: Potter did save my life. Dumbledore made me swear not to tell anyone, but I was right about my Lupin theory, and Lupin would have killed me if Potter hadn't stepped in.*

*As for disappearing...well, I'm not sure what's happened to me. I'm still here (at Hogwarts) but no one seems to be able to see or hear me. Except Lupin, for some reason. I suspect Potter and Black may be behind it. Or perhaps someone else who has it out for me. I'm not certain yet. But I'd love to do research together. I'll wait for you in our spot in the library after dinner. You won't see or hear me, but I'll be there. Maybe writing can be our temporary solution?*

*Your (panicked and invisible) friend,*

*Severus*

*P.S. I hope you're right that I am indeed alive. Even if it means I have Potter to thank for it.*

Severus read it over once before nodding in satisfaction and gathering his things. He sensed someone coming toward him, but he assumed they would pass him by like everyone else. Then the

person stopped in front of him.

“Hi, Snape.”

“Lupin,” Severus said, but it sounded as resigned as Severus felt, so it came off as more of an admonishment than a greeting.

The werewolf didn’t seem to notice. “It looks like we had the same idea.” He gestured around the library.

“Except I’m leaving.”

“Mind if I walk with you for a minute?” He sounded so hopeful that Severus didn’t have the heart to tell him ‘no’. Apparently Lupin took that as a ‘yes’, and he fell in step beside Severus. “What happened back there? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I do mind,” Severus said. He had almost forgotten about the Potions incident in his excitement about Lily’s letter. The reminder of his momentary lack of control--the reminder of his father--only made Severus more anxious for Lupin to leave him alone.

“I’m sorry if I offended you in any way. I was actually just wondering if you grew up brewing potions.”

Lupin’s tone was earnest and apologetic, and Severus found himself answering in spite of himself. “My mother and I used to collect ingredients together. She would let me help with some of the easier ones.” He didn’t know why he told Lupin that. Apparently Severus had become inconveniently chatty after days of being unheard. The weakness made him scowl.

Lupin seemed pleased. “She sounds really lovely.”

Severus walked faster, ready to be done with this conversation.

Lupin sped up as well, apparently not taking the hint. Or perhaps taking the hint and then stomping on it with his increasingly quick feet. “Listen, I know you probably didn’t want to lose any House points, but it would have been good of you to tell Slughorn you were the one responsible.”

“Right,” Severus said warily. He didn’t say anything else though. It wasn’t as though he could promise to do better in the future, at least not until he figured out if his state of being (or lack thereof) was temporary.

Lupin sounded disappointed when he next spoke. “Okay, well. See you later, I guess.”

Severus internally whooped with joy when the werewolf’s footsteps slowed, and he turned toward the Owlery. He was *this close* to having Lily back at his side, and that was enough to make this whole scenario far less terrifying. He wasn’t about to get sidetracked by Lupin, or anything else, for that matter. Once Lily understood, this would get resolved quickly. He was certain of it.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus didn’t know why Snape’s dismissal felt so terrible. It wasn’t like he was under the delusion that they were friends, or even amicable acquaintances. Up until the Prank, Remus had joined

James and Sirius in their bullying, and during the Prank, he had unwittingly almost killed Snape, so Remus could certainly understand Snape not wanting to be around him. His neutrality during Potions was probably a fluke. What was less clear was why Remus suddenly wanted to be around *Snape*.

Surely he hadn't become that lonely in this short time without the Marauders. It was nice having friends for a while, but he'd spent his first two years at Hogwarts alone, and he'd survived. He could do it again if necessary, and recent events had proven that it was indeed necessary. There was still the option of leaving Hogwarts, and in that case, he would be even more alone, so it was a good idea to get used to it now.

Even so, he couldn't erase the emptiness he felt at Sirius' betrayal, nor the sting of Snape's coldness. Despite everything he was and everything he'd done, Remus still yearned for connection, love, friendship, even acquaintanceship. And it hurt to be reminded over and over again that he could never have that.

When James chased him down in the hallway a few minutes into his brooding, Remus was too miserable to tell him off.

"Can we talk?" James ran a hand through his hair. It wasn't his usual gesture, intended to impress Lily or any other girl who happened to pass by, but instead a gesture that looked more like he was hoping to pull a few hairs out.

"James, I don't really want to see any of you right now--"

"It'll just take a moment," he interrupted, "and then I'll leave you to your moping."

Remus wrestled with his options. On the one hand, he'd rather not get a taste of what he'd be missing if he left Hogwarts or never spoke to anyone ever again. On the other hand, James deserved to know why Remus was avoiding him, and Remus was feeling particularly sorry for himself in his loneliness. Perhaps one last conversation with a friend would give him the strength he needed to leave Hogwarts behind. "Fine. Over here." Remus slipped into the nearest secret passage and lit a hanging torch with his wand.

The minute the stone shifted closed behind them, James started talking. "Whatever I did to upset you, either I didn't mean it, it was an accident, or I didn't do it." The words blended together into one giant mouthful, and it took Remus a moment to split them apart in his head. James fiddled with his glasses. "I think that covers all the bases?"

Remus sighed. Sadness, regret, and even a twisted kind of amusement rose up inside him because this apology was so very James. Remus was really going to miss him. "I'm not angry with you," he said carefully. "I'm just...taking some time to reflect on everything."

The relieved exhale James let out in response to his innocence was cut short, and he narrowed his eyes. "By 'everything' you mean what, exactly?"

Remus cursed Prongs for always being so perceptive. *Everything: all the stupid things I let myself believe. That I could have friends. That I could get an education like everyone else. That there was a life for me outside of what I am--a boy separate from the monster. Everything.* "You know what I mean," Remus said instead. "Sirius. The full moon. Nearly killing Snape."

James still looked suspicious, but the intensity of his gaze lessened. "I didn't have anything to do with it, you know. In case that's why you've been avoiding me."

"I know," Remus said, although he hadn't really known for sure--only that James had saved Snape in the end. It was good to have it confirmed.

"Alright. Good. I just--I don't like the idea of you being alone all the time. You can take whatever time you need, but Pete and I are here for you if you need to talk. Sirius is, too, even if you don't want to hear that right now."

Remus didn't know what to say--didn't know how to answer without blurting out that it was a mistake to let any of them in, that he *should* be alone all the time, that he deserved it for what he almost did. For being a monster. So instead he said, "Thanks for covering for me with Slughorn."

James clapped him on the shoulder. "No problem. That's what Marauders are for." James tilted his head to the side. "Although he'll probably get suspicious if you continue to sit alone."

Remus suppressed a groan. A week ago, he wouldn't have minded, but now things were different. "Just because you don't like Snape doesn't mean you can pretend he doesn't exist."

Instead of offering a nasty reply, James just made a strange face. "Snivellus? Who said anything about him?"

"You said I was sitting alone in Potions, but I wasn't. I was sitting with Snape."

Now James was really freaking him out. His eyes had grown wider and his mouth was contorting. "Moony, I hate to break it to you, but your sense of humor has suffered an untimely death."

"I'm not trying to be funny, James," Remus hissed. "I just don't think it's very nice of you to pretend he doesn't exist." *Especially after he almost didn't exist. Because of me. Because of what I do to people.*

"I'm not *pretending*. And while we're on the subject, I don't think it's very nice of you to pretend to be *insane* ." James rubbed his eyes, causing his glasses to become askew. "Look, I'm not sure if you're playing around or if you're hallucinating from stress or lack of sleep, but no one has seen Snape since he went up to Dumbledore's office. Rumor has it he's been expelled--probably for snooping where he shouldn't."

Remus wanted to reply that that was ridiculous, that he'd seen Snape just a few minutes ago, that Dumbledore wouldn't expel him for almost dying, how could he? but all that came out was a squeak.

"Or he's been sent to St. Mungo's," James added. Then he winced at the pallor of Remus' skin. "Sorry, that was a dumb thing to say. I didn't think." There was a wealth of emotion in his eyes, but Remus could only make out pity. "You didn't hurt him, Moony. I'm sure of it."

*No, of course not, Remus thought, I just traumatized him for life. And possibly got him expelled.* Remus wasn't sure what was worse, the guilt, multiplied tenfold by this new information, or the realization that he was probably losing his mind. "I have to go."

"Remus--"

But Remus had already left the passage, letting the stone scrape shut behind him.



## Chapter 3

Severus wanted to scream.

Then he realized nothing was stopping him.

Severus screamed.

No one noticed, of course, not even the owls perched or swooping around the Owlery. Apparently they could find him to *deliver* a letter, but they had no idea where he was when he needed them to take one from him. Against his better judgment, Severus was starting to reconsider the validity of Reason 3. The idea that someone had managed to convince, not just the professors and students, but the *fucking owls* to ignore him was laughable, but he couldn't think of another explanation. Instead of laughing, Severus glared at the insolent birds in the hopes that they could feel it even if they couldn't see him. He wondered if he could disintegrate them with his stare alone. At least then he wouldn't be the only one not really here.

The birds didn't disintegrate which meant Severus' trip to the Owlery was a complete waste of time. The only thing he'd managed to do was acquire a collection of painful scratches while trying to tie his letter to their unwilling claws. He wasn't sure why he tried since the stupid birds wouldn't know to take it to Lily anyway if they couldn't hear him, but he was desperate. He had likely contracted a series of avian-borne diseases as well, so that was fun. Wincing at the depth of some of his wounds, Severus decided it would be wise to visit Madam Pomfrey later, for a healing salve if not to cure his potentially fatal bird disease. Then he remembered he couldn't get medical help because he *didn't fucking exist*. Goddammit.

Gritting his teeth against the stinging of his skin and the ridiculous farse his life had become, Severus brainstormed other solutions to his letter dilemma. His terminal illness could wait; he was probably dead anyway, and right now, Lily was his priority.

Severus considered what he knew from his mini-experiments so far. When he knocked over the cauldron in Potions, people had noticed, and Avery was able to tell when Severus opened his bed curtains, so apparently the objects he moved could be seen by those around him. Perhaps he could track Lily down and hold it a few feet in front of her so it looked like it was floating, or charm it to levitate if that failed. His spells seemed to be working properly. He supposed if neither worked, he could always just leave it somewhere she would be sure to find it. That wasn't quite as cunning as Severus would have liked, but sometimes a simple solution was best.

He spared a passing thought for Lupin who could deliver the letter on his behalf, but that would mean talking to Lupin, explaining he didn't exist, and then asking for his help--which might be terrible enough to make fatal bird disease seem pleasant. No, Lupin would be his last resort, and if

everything went well, that option would be unnecessary. Severus' other ideas were promising after all. Lily would have the letter in no time, and then everything would be okay.

Well, one thing would be okay.

Or at least okay-er.

Severus sighed and set off to find Lily.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Unfortunately, Remus' plan to find Snape and confront him about possibly being a hallucination was not going well. Remus didn't make a habit of spending much time in the dungeons, but he had assumed if he just lurked there long enough, Snape would walk by and Remus could apprehend him. That turned out to be wishful thinking. After about an hour of trying to decide if the substance on the wall he was pressed against was the remnant of a botched potion or run-of-the-mill semi-sentient castle ooze, Remus swore.

*Of course he's not going to walk by. He's not here. He's at home, wherever that is for him, or he's been hospitalized for werewolf-induced trauma.*

It was just Remus' luck that at that moment, a different Slytherin was walking past.

"Lupin?" Regulus asked. The boy had stopped walking in order to squint into the dark alcove in which Remus was hiding. He stepped closer to confirm his guess and pressed his lips into a thin line.

"Er, hello." Great. That sounded intelligent. In Remus' defense, he never knew how to act around Sirius' brother. Sirius didn't get along with him, so out of loyalty, Remus had never been friendly toward Regulus. However, Remus also knew that Sirius secretly cared about him, so he felt uncomfortable being mean to him as well. Thus, Remus usually just avoided Regulus as often as possible. He hadn't seen him coming this time, though, and Remus was backed into a corner.

Regulus quickly glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was looking. "You shouldn't be down here."

Remus thought the words were meant to be a threat, but the bite wasn't there. It never was, at least not the few times Remus had run into Regulus away from the other Slytherins. "I know, it's Slytherin territory. I just need to talk to someone."

Regulus stared at him like he was insane. Remus reminded himself that he most likely was. "Tell them to meet you in the library. Are you trying to get yourself hexed?"

"No, of course not, I just--"

"I know about your condition," Regulus said, and Remus flinched. He didn't know why he was surprised. Of course Regulus knew. Of course Sirius told him. Who *hadn't* he told? "Everyone's always saying that your mother's ill," Regulus continued, "and that's why you're gone all the time, but it didn't add up. So I asked Sirius, and he told me you have a blood curse, and that's why you're always in the Hospital Wing."

Remus breathed out a sigh of relief and tried not to let it show. "Yes, well, I don't want everyone knowing about it."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "I won't tell anyone, but my point is, you're weak. You're a walking target down here all by yourself, and Slytherins won't hesitate to strike if they catch you."

Remus considered pointing out that *Regulus* hadn't hexed him, but he thought that might make him change his mind. Remus peeled himself off the wall slime to better study him. "Why do you care so much? I thought you didn't like me." Remus knew Regulus was softer than the other Slytherins, but he usually didn't go out of his way to be helpful. Remus felt oddly touched, even if he didn't need to be looked after as much as Regulus thought he did. Although today, Regulus' concerns might be warranted. Remus couldn't take on a group of Slytherins right now, blood curse or not, because his ribs and cuts were nowhere near healed.

"I don't like you," Regulus said, straightening his spine and lifting his chin. He looked like every other Slytherin when he did that, but Remus could tell his heart wasn't in it. That was what hurt the most--knowing things could have been different if he'd been as brave as his brother. But then, maybe his brother wasn't brave at all. There was nothing brave about leading an innocent to his death. There was nothing brave about betraying your friends. Maybe there was no hope for either brother. "But Sirius does," Regulus finished.

Remus recoiled. The name sounded like a reprimand for the venomous place his mind had gone. *But am I really being unfair? Or am I just sad to see Sirius' fears proved right? To see he really is like the rest of his family, whether they call him family or not?*

Remus didn't have it in him to commit to that kind of fatalism, though. No matter how angry he was, Remus couldn't forget the good he saw in Sirius. He couldn't forget the love he still felt for him, regardless of how it mingled with betrayal. Remus wanted to tell Regulus that Sirius must not like him much after all, but there was a part of him that didn't believe it. There was a part of him that still believed Sirius cared. And if that wasn't pathetic, Remus didn't know what was.

"I thought you didn't like Sirius either," Remus said instead, tilting his head to the side. He remembered the sound of things breaking. The sound of Sirius throwing everything he owned at their dormitory wall. Everything his once-family had provided for him. Everything that had been touched by Walburga or Orion or even Regulus. Remus remembered the tears streaming down his face, and the way Sirius shook in Remus' arms as he held him until his eyes were dry.

Regulus tightened his hands into fists and then released them. Remus tried not to think about how often Sirius made that same gesture. "I don't hate him," he said, as if daring Remus to disagree. "He's not my brother anymore, but I don't hate him." Regulus scowled and looked away, but the dim light still caught a glimmer of tears. "Even if he cares more about you and Potter and Pettigrew than he ever did about me."

"That's not true--"

"It is." Regulus lifted his chin again. "I know he's moving in with Potter. He's got a new brother now. A Gryffindor one, just like he always wanted."

Remus' heart broke. "Reg--"

"Just get out of here, Lupin. Before anyone else sees you." Regulus cast him one more piteous look before leaving.

Remus took a deep breath that turned into a shuddering exhale. It was easy, in his anger, to dismiss

what Sirius was going through, but Regulus had complicated that. Sirius lost his family. Lost everything. It didn't excuse him, and Remus couldn't forgive him--didn't know if he ever would--but it was enough to make Remus' guilt come back. Not that it had ever really left. Guilt was Remus' oldest friend, after all, and it would probably be his last.

Checking to make sure the coast was clear, Remus made his way back to Gryffindor. He wanted to curl up in bed with his demons for a while. Although it still seemed important to find Snape, Remus figured the voice in his head could wait.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

When Severus finally found Lily, she was walking with MacDonald and Meadowes.

"...think you should just ask him out," Meadowes was saying. "There's no rule saying the girl can't ask out the boy."

"I'm pretty sure there is, Dorcas," MacDonald replied with a laugh.

Severus sped up so he was in front of them. Walking backward to gauge Lily's reaction, he pulled out his letter and held it in front of her.

"Even so," Meadowes continued, "you don't have to follow it. And I doubt he would mind."

Severus shook the letter, hoping to attract Lily's attention.

Lily smiled, but it wasn't at the floating letter. "Dorcas is right. Lupin's really nice. There's no way he'd be upset with you for asking him. He's the only one of them with any sense."

Severus wondered if the letter had to be out of his hands for her to see it. He tossed it in the air and then struggled to catch it. Lily didn't react. Tossing it again, Severus groaned in frustration. It fluttered out of his reach and then Meadowes was trampling it.

"Pettigrew doesn't seem all that bad."

Severus pinched his face up at MacDonald's words. It was bad enough that he was walking backward spinning a letter through the air like a sign twirler for a Muggle car salesman. He definitely didn't want to listen to the supposed merits of Potter's horrible friends while he did it. Snatching up the letter from the ground, he decided to try levitating it this time.

"Maybe not, but he follows Potter and Black around like a pet," Meadowes drawled. Severus cast the spell and watched as Lily walked toward the letter. He held his breath as she grew closer...But she didn't stop to wonder at the floating parchment or try to pick it up. It brushed against her arm as she walked past, and she didn't notice it then either. Severus clenched his jaw, finding himself irritated with Lily even though it wasn't her fault. Surely if she wanted to see the letter, she would. Avery had seen the bed curtains. Was Avery somehow looking for proof that Severus was there while Lily wasn't?

Quickening his pace, Severus decided to try one last time. He ran several paces past them and set it down on the stone floor.

"That's not a very nice thing to say," MacDonald chided.



Lily stifled a laugh as she stepped directly on the letter. "But you must admit it's true, Mary."

Severus felt like crying. He had been so confident this would work. He wouldn't cry though--even if no one could see him. Crying was for bathroom stalls and showers and his bed right before he fell to sleep. It wasn't for wasting time that could be better spent coming up with new ideas. Swallowing against the tightness in his throat, he pocketed the letter.

He followed Lily and her friends back to Gryffindor tower as he considered the possibilities. When they opened up a portrait of a very fat woman, he trailed in behind them. Once inside, he stopped and looked around.

Gryffindor common room was cozier than Slytherin. The chairs were more worn and the fireplace more toasty and the chatting more rambunctious. Black and Potter weren't there, but Pettigrew was squinting at his Charms textbook. Severus wondered when he would stop automatically looking for them in every room, now that they couldn't see him to hurt him anyway. It was a difficult habit to break.

Lily and her friends had already made their way up the staircase when he decided to follow them. Perhaps he could just set the letter on Lily's pillow, and then she'd have to see it before she went to bed. He hurried after them so he could see which room was hers--

...but then the staircase turned into a slide. Because of course, owls couldn't sense him, and Lily couldn't see him, but the *stairs* knew he was there.

Sometimes Severus really hated his life.

Just then, Potter and Black came down the boys' staircase, carrying their quidditch brooms. They stopped by Pettigrew, likely to tease him for the constipated look on his face, and Severus was hit with an idea. A very stupid, very reckless, very Gryffindor idea. He wondered if the idiocy of Gryffindor tower was contagious. But if ever there was a time to be reckless, Severus figured it was now.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

When Remus stepped into the common room, three things immediately stood out to him.

First, Snape was straddling a broomstick at the base of the stairs to the girls' dormitory, a determined gleam in his eye.

Second, James and Sirius were yelling profanities and scrambling after him--or rather, after the possessed broom.

And third, well, Remus could be imagining it, but he could have sworn he saw his sanity fuck right off.

He considered turning around and stepping back outside to mourn the loss of his mind somewhere quiet and safe. But then he saw Snape shoot up the stairs, and he remembered he wanted to talk to him. Or himself, rather. Hallucinating was going to take some getting used to. Taking a deep breath, Remus dove into the chaos.

"...should be the one to go after it since it's my broom!" James was saying as he tugged the

remaining broom toward him.

"But *this* is my broom, so I should be the one to use it." Sirius tugged back with equal force. "And how do I know you wouldn't lose control of this one, too? Then we'd really be screwed."

"Oh come on," James said, "you just want to have a look at the girls' dormitories."

"Well duh." Sirius didn't even have the decency to look ashamed. A clattering upstairs drew their attention away from the broom, and Remus used that moment to take it from their hands.

"Oi, Moony!"

But his surprise tactic worked, and Remus was up the stairs before they could stop him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the stairs had become a slide again, and the two Marauders were trying to lizard-crawl their way up while several girls tugged them back by their ankles.

There was another crashing sound from up ahead, so Remus darted toward it on his broom, hitting several walls on his way. He'd never been good on a broom, but trying to fly in a cramped hallway was even worse. Several girls opened their doors to see the cause of the commotion which led to some laughter and horrified yells as well as Remus almost crashing into a fourth year when she stepped a little too far into the hall in front of him.

"Sorry!" he yelled as he whipped past her. Turning a corner (and consequently knocking down a tapestry as he hit another wall), Remus finally spotted Snape. Snape dismounted, with possibly even less grace than Remus, and slipped into one of the rooms.

Remus tried to come to a stop but ended up tumbling on the stone floor. So much for his relative grace. Merlin, Remus hated flying. His bones ached from the crash, and some of his almost-healed wounds had reopened. Right now, however, his curiosity was stronger than his pain, so he gritted his teeth and picked himself up off the ground. When he stepped into the room, Lily, Mary, and Dorcas stared back at him, the former two with confusion and the latter like she wanted to hex him.

"Remus? What are you doing here?"

Remus' eyes flicked over to Lily, but before he could respond, he caught sight of Snape behind her, reaching past her bed curtains. Remus heard a quiet *pop*, but only Dorcas seemed to notice. "I...um..." He wanted to step closer, to see what Snape was doing, but he couldn't without arousing more suspicion.

Lily glanced behind her, trying to figure out what Remus was staring at. She lifted an eyebrow.

Another *pop* had Remus' eyes darting toward Snape, but he forced them back to Lily. "Sorry," he said finally. "I know this sounds strange, but I think Sirius might have planted a dungbomb in your room. I was going to come up and remove it before it did any damage, but I didn't realize you would be here."

Mary glanced around with wide eyes, looking for the made-up dungbomb, while Dorcas narrowed her eyes like she was putting a lie-detecting lens on her vision. Lily just studied him closely. "Okay." She bit her lip, and Remus could see the calculations happening behind her eyes. She knew he was lying, that much was clear, but he wasn't sure what she was going to do about it. "We'll leave you to it." Dorcas looked at her in shock, but Lily didn't seem to notice. "Just...don't try anything funny, or you won't hear the end of it."

Remus nodded quickly. "Of course. It shouldn't take long."

Lily gave him a tight smile and slipped past, with Mary following along behind. Mary gave a more genuine smile and offered her gratitude. Remus didn't dare meet Dorcas' eyes for fear that she might punch him or worse. And then the door shut, and Remus was alone with Snape.

"Snape?" Remus asked quietly.

The Slytherin didn't move. He was still at Lily's bedside, half inside the curtains. Remus moved closer and pulled them all the way back. Snape was shaking, eyes locked on Lily's pillow, which was covered in what looked like ashes.

"Snape, are you okay?" Remus asked. The silence pressed down on him like a physical weight. "Snape, please say something. You're scaring me." When Snape still didn't respond, Remus placed a hand on his shoulder.

Snape flinched away. "Don't touch me," he snapped. "I'm fine." But there was a wavering in his voice that kept the anxiety building in Remus' stomach.

"You don't seem fine." Remus swallowed. *You seem real, though. More real than anything else.* "James told me you got expelled, or sent to St. Mungo's."

Snape didn't respond. His eyes were still locked on Lily's pillow.

"Apparently in Potions earlier today, you weren't there, and that's why Slughorn only gave me detention." Remus tried for a laugh, but it came out bitter and strained. "I'll probably get detention for this too. Or maybe they'll just send me to St. Mungo's, and I can join you there."

Snape looked up finally. "I'm not at St. Mungo's."

Remus nodded, feeling a bit dizzy from the intensity of his eyes. "You're alive though?" He hated the way his voice broke, hated that he was seeking reassurance that he wasn't a murderer from the voice inside his head.

Snape's gaze dropped to the floor. "I'm not sure. I feel alive." A shadow crossed his features. "But no one else seems to think I'm here at all, dead or alive."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me." Then he blinked. "Wow, I'm just now realizing that I'm reprimanding a figment of my imagination for not telling me I'm going crazy. Wonderful."

"You're not crazy," Snape said, before wrinkling his nose. "Or at least, not because of this."

Remus snorted. "Well if the voice in my head thinks I'm sane, I guess everything's fine." Remus thought he saw the hint of a smile on Snape's face. He must have imagined it. *Just like I'm imagining everything else.* He wished Snape would look up again--it was easier to feel like this was real with Snape's eyes on his. "Am I the only one who can see you?"

Snape gave a quick jerk of his head.

"Why?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Snape scoffed. "I didn't choose you. If I had a choice, I wouldn't be sneaking into Lily's room to give her a letter right now, and I wouldn't be standing here getting interrogated by you. I'd be working with my best friend to figure out what the *fuck* is going on."

"Okay, okay." Remus had never heard Snape swear before, but the way he said it made it sound natural, like he did it all the time. Remus wondered if his parents taught him that, or maybe his

fellow Slytherins. "I didn't mean to suggest anything, I'm just trying to figure all this out. You said you had a letter for Lily?"

Snape squeezed his eyes shut, and Remus finally realized the significance of the ashes.

"It disintegrated the moment I set it down." Snape yanked the curtains shut. "*Fuck.*"

He was shaking even more now, and Remus had to hug himself to keep from touching Snape again. When Sirius got like this, Remus would always pull him into an embrace or let him curl up on Remus' bed as Padfoot for a while. Remus didn't know how to comfort someone who didn't want him near. And he definitely didn't know how to navigate paper-disintegrating curses placed on invisible wizards.

"I hate this," Snape said. "I can't even tell her what's going on, or that I'm okay." He faltered. "I don't even know that I *am* okay. I'm not even sure if I'm real or not. How *fucked up* is that?" He was shaking, and his eyes were wild with barely restrained tears.

When Remus felt the urge to reach for him this time, he didn't pause long enough to talk himself out of it. His hands settled on Snape's shoulders, and Snape flinched again but looked up instead of pulling away. There was fear in his eyes, and Remus hated that he was probably the cause, but he knew this is what he needed to do. "You're real," he said. He didn't believe it though, so he said it again, more firmly, unsure which of them he was trying to convince. "You're real."

Snape held his gaze, even though his eyes shifted like he wanted to look away. The longer they stood there, the more clear it became that Snape's fear wasn't from Remus but from his own existential doubt. Remus knew it from the way Snape's shaking continued but his shoulders relaxed under Remus' touch. The way Snape shifted closer, just an inch, as if testing to see if he was truly solid or if he would instead move straight through Remus' flesh. When Remus felt this gentle, subconscious push, he let go of caution and pulled Snape into his arms.

And somehow, Snape let him. Remus felt Snape's long fingers clutch onto his robes, bunching up the fabric. Remus heard Snape let out a shuddering breath against his chest, and he heard the beating of Snape's heart inside his own chest. He wondered if that was a werewolf thing or if everyone could do that, but he was afraid to ask and remind Snape what a monster he was. "Your heart is beating," he whispered in reassurance. A sob broke free from Snape's throat, and Remus held him tighter. "You're alive." Snape turned his face to press into Remus' neck, and his exhales tickled Remus' skin. "You're real."

The door opened suddenly and Lily stepped in. Remus let go of Snape and turned to face her, heart pounding. With another person in the room, he was already starting to question if the words he'd just uttered were lies. If the gasping sounds from beside him were any indication, Snape was too. Remus was afraid he was going to pass out from hyperventilation, so he edged closer until their arms were just barely touching. Snape leaned into him, and Remus thought maybe his breathing calmed a bit.

"Did you find the dung bomb?" Lily's sarcasm was barely hidden, but her eyes searched the room for the real reason for his being there.

Snape's hand brushed against his, and Remus' breath caught in his throat at the contact. But then it darted away, and Remus realized what had happened. He held up the dungbomb Snape had transfigured, impressed that the Slytherin was so quick-thinking even in his current state. "Yes, it's right here." At the sight of the dungbomb, Lily's skepticism actually increased. Remus shifted uncomfortably. "I should probably get it outside--it's on a timer, and I'm not sure when it's meant to go off."



Lily nodded slowly, stepping away from the door and gesturing toward it. "Off you go then." As he started to do so, she added a hesitant, "Thanks, I guess."

"No problem. I'm sorry Sirius is such an arse." He didn't feel bad for throwing Sirius under the bus. It was nice to get to air out his frustration since he couldn't exactly tell anyone the real reason he was angry.

Lily and Snape both snorted, causing Remus to do a double-take. For the first time, he saw a hint of why they were friends.

"Glad you've seen the light." Lily tilted her head to the side. "You know, I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to."

"Um, I--"

Lily rolled her eyes. "I just noticed you haven't been spending time with Black and Potter lately, and I thought you might want a friend. But don't worry about it, I forgot that guys are idiots who don't like to talk about their feelings or whatever."

Remus smiled. "Thanks, Lily."

She returned the smile, but then it slipped from her face and she hugged her arms around herself. "Hey, I don't know if you were involved in whatever happened the other night, and I know you don't really like him, but I was just wondering if you knew anything about Severus?" Snape's eyes went wide, and Remus could see the desire in them, the way he wanted so much to tell her he was there. "I wrote to him, but I haven't heard anything back, and I'm worried."

Remus looked to Snape for a response, but he was shaking again, and he didn't look like he was going to find his voice any time soon.

"He's okay," Remus said finally, and Lily looked so relieved that Remus wanted to embrace her too. Instead, he glanced at Snape again. He didn't know what he was allowed to say--how much Snape would want him to say. But Snape was smiling softly at the emotion on Lily's face, and suddenly Remus forgot why he looked at him in the first place. Or rather, why he'd never looked at him-- *really* looked at him--before now. When he smiled, his whole appearance changed. He was just as disproportionate and strange as ever, but he *glowed*. His eyes were filled with so much emotion that Remus felt tears spring to his own eyes. Swallowing, he looked back at Lily and said, "I really do need to get this out of here," he held up the dungbomb, "but I can tell you more later if you'd like?"

Lily's face lit up, and her eyes flicked to the dungbomb like she was thinking about risking it. "Tomorrow night?"

Remus shook his head. "I have detention with Slughorn then. How about the day after?"

Lily bit her lip. Remus had never noticed how often she did that before. Then again, perhaps she hadn't felt the need to do so as much before Snape went missing.

"He really is okay," Remus said, because she needed to be reassured, because that's what Snape wanted her to know, because Remus wanted it to be true.

Lily sighed. "Okay, yes, the day after tomorrow. Now get that thing out of here."

Remus smiled and slipped out the door, picking up both broomsticks on his way. It took him a moment to realize Snape was walking beside him. "You'll have to tell me what you want me to say

to her,” he said under his breath.

Snape didn't reply, but Remus could see the positive change in his demeanor since seeing Lily's concern for him, and that made Remus' chest warm. When they reached the end of the hallway, Snape stopped and flicked his eyes up to Remus'. There was a degree of indecision in his gaze, like he was battling with himself. The warring emotions shuttered, and Snape said, "Thank you."

Before Remus could think to reply, Snape had slid down the not-stairs and stepped out of sight. Taking a moment to gather his wits, Remus stepped forward with the two broomsticks in hand, allowing James and Sirius to finally catch sight of him.

They both cheered as Remus slid down to meet them, but everyone went silent at the sound of McGonagall's voice.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Remus glanced at the dungbomb in his hand and the broomsticks in his other and hoped the Marauders would forgive him, just this once, for being a traitor.

## Chapter 4

Severus was waiting in the library for Lupin, and there was something deeply unsettling about that. He had spent the night feeling alternately hopeful about Lily learning of his situation and anxious about Lupin being the one to initiate it. As a result, he hadn't slept, and now his right eye was twitching.

When he heard someone approaching, Severus curled further over his research. Lupin had hugged him yesterday, after almost killing him a few nights before, and now Severus was reliant on him to tell Lily the truth. It was an uncomfortable situation all around, and on a scale of hugs to murder, Severus wasn't sure what version of Lupin he was hoping for today.

"Hi, Snape," he greeted, pulling out the chair across from him. It made a terrible scraping sound, and for a few moments, it was all Severus could hear.

Suddenly he couldn't remember how he greeted people. Did he say 'hello'? 'Hi'? A casual 'hey'? Even if he could remember which one he usually used, was it appropriate for Lupin? How did he retain their enmity while also convincing Lupin to help him?

"Could you pull your chair out any louder?" Shit. That wasn't right. It wasn't even a greeting. How the fuck was he going to do this?

But Lupin didn't get up and leave. Instead, he pointed at the book in front of Severus and asked, "What's that?"

"Research on the afterlife," Severus said shortly.

"How come?"

Severus hoped the withering look he sent Lupin's way properly expressed judgment at his idiocy. "To see if I'm living it."

"Oh. Er, right." There was a flash of guilt across his face, and Severus wondered if Lupin was worried he was responsible. Severus certainly hadn't ruled it out. "Make any progress?"

"I've yet to find anything that resembles my situation."

"Well, that's--" Lupin cleared his throat. "That's good, right?"

Severus studied him, wondering how he'd gotten stuck with this imbecile, out of everyone in the cosmos. "I haven't decided yet."

Lupin smiled at him, as if Severus had told a clever joke. "It's good," Lupin said firmly. Severus narrowed his eyes. Lupin was still staring at him, and he was still smiling, and he still wasn't fulfilling his purpose. Severus found this all rather upsetting.

“So. Lily,” he tried. What was it with Lupin and staring at him? It seemed to be happening with concerning frequency. Before turning invisible, Severus had gotten used to stares from his peers, but they were usually accompanied by a disgusted curl of the lip or a hint of fear. Lupin's stare was...different, and Severus didn't know what it meant. He did know that it set his teeth on edge.

“Right.” Lupin pulled out a quill and a sheet of parchment. “What would you like me to tell her?”

Severus blinked, caught off-guard by the suddenness of the question. Although Severus had been the one to initiate the topic switch, he wasn't actually ready to spill his heart to Lily through Lupin. “Er—” He tried to recall the letter he'd written. When he remembered that he'd intended to reveal Lupin's secret, his stomach twisted unexpectedly. He filed that response away for later. Or never, if he could postpone it that long. “I want her to know the basics,” he said carefully. “I'm here. You're the only one who can see or hear me. I can move things and cast spells, but for some reason I can't write to her.” Lupin was dutifully writing notes, which Severus felt redeemed his previous incompetence to a degree. Severus stared at the parchment to avoid looking at Lupin. “I miss her.” Lupin didn't skip a beat in his writing, for which Severus was grateful.

“Got it. Anything else?”

Severus tugged at his fingers. “That's it.” He wished there was a way to actually talk to Lily instead of just relaying the situation, but writing apparently wouldn't work as a method of communication, and Severus didn't have any other ideas.

“Great. So how can I help?”

Severus looked up in confusion. “...by giving her my message? I thought we were clear on this, Lupin.”

Lupin smiled and pulled the top book on Severus' stack toward him. “I meant with the research. Anything in particular I'm looking for?”

It was Severus' turn to stare at Lupin. He expected to find ill will hidden somewhere underneath his benevolent facade, but Lupin's smile didn't waver. That only made him more suspicious. Severus gripped his book tighter. Part of him wanted to tell Lupin to fuck off, but a louder part just wanted a solution and fast, so he gritted his teeth and said, “I'm trying to find out if there's any chance that I'm dead, so we're looking for any mention of an invisible, inaudible ghost that can touch things and pick them up.”

“I've never heard of that.” Lupin opened the book anyway.

Severus didn't trust the amiable tone in the air, so he taunted, “You're just hoping you didn't kill me.”

Lupin didn't flinch, but he did glance up, a wary look in his eyes. “I feel like you should be hoping for that too.”

Severus just shrugged. He *was* hoping for that, but if he was honest, he really just wanted an answer, even if it wasn't one he particularly liked. Speaking of answers he wasn't sure he would like...

Severus pulled up his sleeves to reveal his clumsily bandaged arms. “Are you responsible for this?” he demanded.

Lupin glanced up and frowned. “You think I hurt you? When?” He paled. “During the full moon? I thought--”



"No, Lupin, you didn't--" The way Lupin constantly found reasons to blame himself for everything was horrifically annoying. "You didn't hurt me."

Lupin narrowed his eyes. "I thought no one else could see you. Have you been hurting yourself?"

Severus was going to throttle him. "I'm not wondering about how I got my injuries, I'm asking about the bandages!"

Instead of realizing what an idiot he was being and resolving to be helpful from now on, Lupin said, "That didn't answer my question."

Severus didn't know what he'd done to be cursed invisible, but he had certainly never done anything horrible enough to be cursed with Lupin's company. "I'm not-- *urgh!* I didn't hurt myself, you idiot. It was the owls. They scratched me while I was trying to send my letter to Lily. *Now* will you tell me why you snuck into my room and bandaged my arms in the middle of the night?"

"I--what?" Lupin looked so confused that Severus wondered if he had hit him over the head and given him a concussion without realizing it. Severus wouldn't put it past himself. He didn't usually give in to violent urges, but then, he usually didn't try to converse with Lupin for long periods of time either. Or any period of time, if he could help it. With that justification in mind, Severus let himself ponder whether hitting Lupin now could do the reverse and knock some sense into him. It couldn't hurt to try. Severus was in the process of lifting various books on the table to see which was heaviest when Lupin said, "I didn't bandage your arms. But that means someone else can see-- what are you doing?"

Severus' jaw twitched but he set down the book he was about to hit Lupin with. "Nothing. Go on."

Lupin eyed him skeptically but continued. "So someone else must be able to see you."

"And also care enough to try and help me," Severus pointed out. The list of people who would bandage his wounds, even before he was invisible, was small. Probably just Lily and Madam Pomfrey--and *maybe* Mulciber if he was in a good mood and also the one responsible for injuring him while they practiced dark curses on each other. Hm, that was something he hadn't considered. Perhaps this was an experiment by his housemates. It would certainly explain how someone got into his room last night if they had access to it already.

Reason 5: Mulciber and perhaps some of the other Slytherins were practicing the Dark Arts and Severus was the latest test subject.

Oddly enough, that was the most comforting reason yet. He didn't trust that his dormmates knew what they were doing, or even that they would try to reverse the damage, but at least that meant it was a spell someone his age could stumble upon rather than an arcane curse known only by a few-- or Merlin forbid, a new invention that didn't yet have a counter-curse. At least this way Severus would likely be able to find a solution in the library. And whether it was fixable or not, he preferred to be left in the hands of his fellow Slytherins instead of strangers or Potter's gang.

"Do you think Madam Pomfrey did it?" Lupin said, drawing Severus back to their conversation.

Severus gave him an unimpressed look, and held up his arms again, in case Lupin had missed the shoddy bandage job the first time. "That is an insult to her talents. Not to mention, I've never seen her come to a student's room unannounced before, and also...what was that important detail again? Oh right, she *can't see me.*"

"Maybe that's why she wasn't up to her usual standards," Lupin argued. "It wouldn't surprise me if

she has a sixth sense for injured students or something, but since she couldn't see you, she had to work by touch alone."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "Remember when I implied there were other reasons you might be crazy? This. This is what I was talking about."

Lupin grinned at him before opening his book and starting to read.

...alright. Apparently the conversation was over. That was fine. It wasn't like they hadn't reached a conclusion or anything. Severus sighed and turned back to his own book, resolving to reconsider the bandage situation later when he was alone. He would no doubt be more productive without Lupin's idiocy slowing him down.

Lupin didn't speak for a long while, and Severus assumed he was absorbed in his reading. But then he cleared his throat. Severus wondered if werewolves had scratchy vocal cords--perhaps something to do with the howling.

"Snape, I'd like to be your friend," he said.

Severus lowered his brows, trying to focus on the book in front of him. "I would not like that."

Lupin reached forward and peeled Severus' hands from his book. Severus stared at their connected appendages in horror. Thankfully, Lupin let go and placed a bookmark--where did he get that?--in the book before closing it. "Why not?"

"Because--" Severus couldn't come up with anything compelling, but he knew he had good reasons. Dammit, where had he put them?

"I'm not speaking to my friends," Lupin said slowly, "and you *can't* speak to yours--"

"So I need to figure out how to become visible and audible again, and whether or not you make nice with your wretched Gryffindor gang is of no interest to me."

"They're not that bad."

"See? A perfect example of why we shouldn't be friends. You think attempted murder is 'not that bad' and I think it's despicable. If we can't even agree on simple things like that, then I *really* don't know how you expect us to have a cordial conversation about something else."

"Okay, fine, they're bad," Lupin conceded, although he didn't look as reluctant as Severus had expected. "But your friends aren't much better. Did you hear what Mulciber tried to do to Mary--"

Severus groaned. "I am not listening to this from you, too. *Tried*, Lupin. He *failed*. You can't be truly wretched unless you're actually capable of doing the horrible things you set out to do. Like your Gryffindor friends are."

"Oh, so you think Gryffindors are more competent than Slytherins, do you?"

"What?" Severus sputtered. "That is *not* what I--no. Just--no." He glared heavily, irritated that Lupin had managed to get him off track enough to prolong this terrible conversation. "We should not be friends."

Lupin's hands twitched, and Severus put his own hands in his lap, worried that Lupin would try to touch him again. There was nothing wrong with that exactly (Lupin actually had rather nice hands--larger than Severus' and not too sweaty) except that it was confusing, and all Severus wanted was

for a single thing in his life to make sense right now.

Lupin retracted his hands too, and a palpable sadness came over him. "Alright."

Severus eyed him carefully, trying to figure out why he didn't feel satisfaction at winning this strange battle. Was it guilt? Severus didn't like that such an unpleasant feeling kept coming over him. But then Severus saw Lupin's expression flicker, and his eyes widened. "You manipulative bastard."

Lupin's brows furrowed slightly in response, like he was pretending to be confused. When Severus lifted his own brows in an unimpressed fashion, Lupin dropped pretenses and smiled good-naturedly. "You know, the professors never pick up on that."

"It's hard to fall for the kicked puppy routine when I've seen you as a wolf."

Lupin laughed a little too hard at that, and Severus wondered if the Gryffindor was feeling well. He didn't ask though. They *weren't* friends. "We aren't friends," he said aloud, deciding it might benefit Lupin to hear it again.

"Uh-huh." Lupin started reading the book again, and Severus scowled. How dare Lupin befriend him against his will? It was infuriating.

Severus wanted to return to his own reading, but he was too busy sulking, and he didn't want to reach for his book for fear of putting his hands in touching distance. Lupin looked up after several minutes to find Severus glaring at him. Without saying a word, Lupin reached over and opened Severus' book to the correct page. The hopeful look on his face was almost more than Severus could take. Would it be better to start reading so he didn't have to look at him, or keep looking so as not to give Lupin the satisfaction of successfully nudging him toward his book and away from the conversation that clearly wasn't finished? Severus decided on the second choice.

After several minutes of this, he realized neither of them were looking away. It was like a bizarre, unfun staring contest, and he certainly wasn't going to lose. It helped that Lupin wasn't bad to look at, if Severus ignored the smug expression that curled across his face. Severus was especially focused on his eyes--sort of toffee-colored and dotted with tiny splotches of ink. Severus tried to count the splotches, but he realized he'd need to get closer for that. Around the eyes--and everywhere else--there were pale scars marring his skin. Severus wondered if werewolves could partially heal from werewolf scratches, since a human who'd been clawed like that would have much more painful and obvious marks. There were a few deeper cuts from the last full moon with angry rough edges, but the older ones were faint and white. Severus followed the path of one scar from forehead to eyebrow to cheek, and then jumped to another that went across both lips. Strangely, he felt the urge to touch them. He wondered if they would be smooth and flat, or raised above the skin. He wondered if Lupin would wince, or if he barely knew they were there anymore. He wondered what it would feel like to wake up after a full moon covered in blood, unsure if it was his own or a victim's.

It was that thought that finally made Severus look away. He glanced back up after a few seconds, ready to glare at Lupin's victorious expression, but Lupin wasn't looking at him. A faint pinkness colored his cheeks, and it made his scars even more starkly white against his skin.

"So what do you say?" Lupin asked.

Severus tried to remember what they were talking about before his brain melted out of his ears and left him staring dumbly at Lupin for half an hour. "About what?"

“Can we be friends?”

Severus opened and closed his mouth several times. Turning back to his reading once and for all, he wondered what he had to lose. He was probably dead, after all. Severus twisted his mouth in an attempt to make his answer sound less like a concession. “If it will make you shut up.”

Severus could feel Lupin’s smile as if the atmosphere had reshaped to accommodate it, but he didn’t make a sound.

They read in silence for a long time. Even though they didn’t speak or look at each other (or perhaps because of that), Severus found he actually liked having company. Oddly enough, he didn’t even hate that it was Lupin’s company. He’d never tell Lupin that, but he had the sneaking suspicion that somehow he knew.

When Lupin stretched and closed the book he was reading--putting in another bookmark from who knew where--Severus glanced up. “Thanks for letting me work with you. When are you researching next?”

The thought of another sleepless night was physically painful, but the idea of being stuck in this weird limbo for longer than necessary was worse. “I’ll probably be here all night, and then I’ll come back in between classes until I find some answers.”

Lupin frowned. “Why are you still going to classes? Aren’t the professors likely to mark you absent regardless?”

Severus lifted a brow. “Some of us attend classes to actually learn things.”

Lupin grinned. “That’s why you let me sit next to you in Potions yesterday, right? So you could actually brew the potion without raising any questions about why it was brewing itself?”

Severus flushed and ducked his head. “Yes.” He had considered brewing it on his own, if only to see if anyone noticed so they could help him out of this dreadful situation, but then there was a chance that Potter or Black might have figured it out, and that would be worse than no one knowing. It would get rid of the one upside of this disaster. “I didn’t mean to get you detention in the process though.”

Severus saw Lupin shrug from beneath his lashes. “It’s alright. I’m headed there now actually.”

“I can go with you,” Severus said before he could stop himself. “Since it was my fault anyway.”

Lupin’s eyes sparkled. Actually *sparkled*. Severus almost wished he hadn’t said anything. “Thank you,” Lupin said before sighing. “Sirius will be there though, so we wouldn’t be able to talk.”

“What did Black do?”

Lupin smirked. “The excuse I gave Lily for the commotion yesterday was Sirius planting a dungbomb, remember?”

Severus was sort of impressed. “I didn’t realize you’d be willing to turn in your friend like that.” *You certainly never turned them in when they bullied me. Even though you were a Prefect and it was your job to make them stop.* Severus was less impressed when he remembered that.

“Yes, well, I’m rather livid at him at the moment, and he can’t get punished for what he did to you without exposing my condition, so I made sure he got punished for something at least.”



Severus nodded, unable to find satisfaction in a punishment that was far too painless for Black's crimes. Flashbacks from that night played through his mind, and Severus wrung his hands. *Bones breaking, muscle tearing, jaws snapping*-- "He should have been expelled."

Lupin nodded slowly, and the look in his eyes told Severus he knew what images were going through Severus' head. "I should have been too."

Severus didn't know what to say to that. He was pretty sure he still thought it was true.

"Try to get some sleep tonight, yeah? And let me know if you find anything." Lupin waited for Severus to agree before giving a small wave and making his exit.

Severus tried not to feel too comforted by Lupin expressing care for him, but he didn't have many friends, and it was good to know the one person who could see and hear him didn't hate him. Even if Severus was still pissed off that apparently they were friends now.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus was more anxious about this detention than he'd expected to be. Slughorn had popped out for a moment while waiting for Sirius to arrive, and Remus almost hoped Sirius wouldn't show. He hadn't spoken to him since the morning after the full moon, and Remus dreaded sitting in silence together for the next hour, almost as much as he dreaded having to talk to him.

Realizing he had broken through a few layers of skin on his hand from scratching, Remus tried to think about something else instead. The first thing that came to mind was Snape. Spending the evening in the library with him had been...nice. Exciting even, which was odd since they had mostly just fruitlessly researched ghosts stared at each other. Something about Snape's twitchy movements and expressive features was...intriguing, to say the least, although that wasn't exactly the right word. Remus wondered if he could join Snape again after detention ended. If he went back, Remus would try not to stare at Snape again like an idiot. Thankfully, the Slytherin didn't seem to mind, but he would definitely find it bizarre if Remus did it again.

Remus would just have to keep his new fascination with Snape nonchalant. It was one thing to admit to himself that he liked looking at Snape--which he already wasn't emotionally ready to deal with right now--but it was another for Snape to catch on to his obsession. They were friends now, so at least Remus would hopefully have more opportunities to look at him and talk to him and maybe even hug him again. Even as he hoped, he knew that last option wasn't likely. He wouldn't be at Hogwarts for much longer anyway, and there was no way Snape would let him hug him twice. The first time was a special circumstance.

Regardless, Remus was ridiculously glad Snape had agreed to their friendship. It wasn't like Remus to be so forward, or to have much confidence at all around people he didn't know very well, but it was easier when Snape was possibly imaginary. Not that Remus was hoping Snape was just in his head. He was *really* hoping he wasn't going crazy, and that Snape was real, but he'd learned to appreciate a silver lining when it came along.

"What are you looking so happy about?" Sirius asked, dropping into the seat beside Remus. Remus, meanwhile, carefully wiped his face of any emotion and stared pointedly at the wall. "Remus, mate--"

"*Mates* don't use each other as murder weapons."

"I've tried to apologize," Sirius said, a dog-like whine in his voice, "but you won't let me talk to you."

"And yet, here you are. Talking to me." Remus couldn't look at him. He hated knowing someone he'd cared about so much had betrayed him so horribly, and he hated that if he let his guard down, he would probably cave. Remus always caved sooner or later when the Marauders were involved, and he couldn't afford to do that this time. Sirius had proven he was too dangerous to hold close.

"I've been trying to give you space! It's not *my* fault I'm here. You were the one who went and got me detention for something I didn't do."

Remus turned toward him at this, trying to contain the growl that wanted to escape. "I got you detention because you couldn't get detention for what you *did* do." Remus looked him over, assessing his appearance. There were bags under his eyes and his hair was unwashed, shirt wrinkled. As if the guilt was eating him alive. Remus felt justified in taking some satisfaction from it. "I wanted you to be punished," he said as clearly as possible in case Sirius still didn't get it. "I just didn't realize McGonagall would let Slughorn handle your detention too."

Sirius looked wounded, but he nodded after a long moment and turned to watch the door for Slughorn's arrival. They didn't speak while they waited, but Sirius' knee was bouncing and Remus had started scratching at his skin again. The tension in the room was elastic and all-encompassing, and when Slughorn walked through the door, Remus was almost surprised he didn't bounce back out.

"Your task is simple tonight, boys: cleaning cauldrons by hand." He gestured toward a table full of grimy cauldrons and a cup full of toothbrushes. "Wands, please." Remus and Sirius handed them over, as requested, and Slughorn gave a satisfied nod. "I'll be in my office if you have any trouble, but otherwise, just stay here until all the cauldrons are clean." And with that, he stepped out the door again, leaving them alone.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Research was already becoming tedious. Severus had learned that he wasn't a ghost, although his personal experience with them had made him fairly certain of that before he'd even opened any of these books, and he'd ruled out poltergeists--which had originally seemed quite promising--because they were never alive to begin with. As he started the next book in his pile, however, he snapped himself out of his half-sleep.

*When a magical person dies, their inner and outer bodies separate. The outer body becomes what one might call a 'corpse' while the inner body either 'passes on' or becomes a ghost.*

Severus reread those two lines to make sure he'd understood them correctly. As soon as he was sure, he placed one of Lupin's bookmarks in the pages and hurried out of the library.

It was a surprise to find that the first thing he wanted to do was tell Lupin. Severus was still unhappy about their--he wrinkled his nose--"friendship," and if anyone asked him (ha) why he was playing along with this coerced comradery, Severus wouldn't know what to say. But no one would ask, and Lupin had made Severus agree to let him know if he found anything, so really, he was just

keeping his word. And in his defense, his desire wasn't Lupin-specific. He wanted to tell *someone* the news, and Lupin just happened to be the only person who could hear him.

When Severus reached Slughorn's classroom, he opened the door as quietly as he could and slipped inside. The sight of Black almost made him turn around again, but he reminded himself that he was invisible, and that made it easier to breathe.

His eyes found Remus. "I'm not dead," he greeted cheerfully. Well, 'cheerfully' was probably an overstatement, but it was more cheerful than anything Severus had said to Lupin previously.

Lupin looked up sharply, dropping his cauldron and causing it to clatter across the floor.

"You alright?" Black asked.

Lupin glared at him and picked up the cauldron once more. "Fine."

Severus made his way over to Lupin and took a seat on the floor beside him. Black was all the way on the other side of the table with his back turned, and Severus thought Lupin could whisper without Black hearing.

"What are you doing?" Lupin asked under his breath, scrubbing at the cauldron but eyeing Severus with interest.

For some reason, Lupin's gaze made Severus feel like his skin was buzzing. It was good, in a weird kind of way. "I made a breakthrough in my research, and it turns out I haven't died yet."

Lupin glanced at Black to make sure he wasn't looking before turning to smile. "That's wonderful. Did you bring the book with you?"

Severus placed it in front of them and opened it to the right page. Lupin leaned in close to read it, pressing against Severus from shoulder to elbow. It was rather distracting, but Severus didn't move away. The feeling of someone touching him was exactly what he craved right now. Especially since Lupin's ability to touch him was critical to his breakthrough.

"See, for someone to die, their inner and outer bodies must be separate, but mine are still together."

"How did you check this out of the library?" Lupin asked, and Severus once again felt the urge to hit him over the head with a book. Apparently it showed on his face because Lupin grimaced.

"Right. Not important, sorry." He focused back on the page, and Severus watched his eyes flick back and forth several times. "Inner and outer bodies..." he mused. "Inner body meaning the soul?"

"Exactly. So since my soul is still inside my physical form," Severus leaned further into Lupin for emphasis, "I'm not dead."

A tightness went out of Lupin's spine, and he let his head fall on Severus' shoulder. "That's really really good to hear."

Severus hummed, so happy to be making progress that he didn't mind the unexpected physical content. Lupin's curls tickled Severus' neck, and he let his own head lean against Lupin's. He hadn't realized how much he didn't want to be dead until he'd found out he was alive. That wasn't unusual for him. After what Severus had seen of life so far, he'd learned not to get his hopes up until he was at least ninety percent certain of something. Now that he felt confident he was alive, all he wanted was to hold onto his vitality, and at the moment, that meant holding onto Lupin. Without letting himself think about it too much, Severus took Lupin's hand in his. Lupin's fingers squeezed back, and Severus decided he was right before: Lupin's hands were quite nice, as far as

hands went, and Severus liked the way they felt in his.

Of course, Black picked that moment to speak, and Severus jumped. “Moony, I can’t hear you cleaning. Are you really going to make me do this all on my own?”

“Serves him right,” Severus muttered.

Lupin pushed him slightly, but a breath of laughter escaped him. “I’m cleaning, Sirius. I’m just not as loud as you are.”

Black scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. How quiet can a toothbrush scrubbing a cauldron be?” There was a shuffling sound, and Severus realized Black was making his way around the table.

Severus separated himself from Lupin while Lupin sighed. “You’re coming to check? Very mature, Sirius.”

Getting an idea, Severus pulled out his wand. “*Scorgio*.”

Lupin looked at him in surprise, a glimmer of mischief in his eye, and Severus smiled slyly.

When Black dropped down in front of them to inspect the cauldrons, his jaw dropped. “You’ve already cleaned this many? How in Merlin’s name...”

Severus flicked his wand and several used toothbrushes started scrubbing Black’s face. Lupin’s hand shot to his mouth to hide his laughter.

“What the--?”

Severus said another spell, this one of his own creation, and the cauldrons grew spider legs and started crawling toward Black. Usually, the spell was for the more mundane use of calling Severus’ cauldron to him--‘*accio*’ worked for fast-moving things, but potions would slosh out of the pot with such an abrupt spell--but it worked brilliantly for this purpose.

“Shit,” Black said as the cauldrons backed him into a wall. “Moony!”

Lupin simply shrugged innocently. “It isn’t me. Slughorn took our wands, remember?”

“I’m well aware of that, Remus,” Black said, and his voice was an octave too high. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m being attacked by *potions supplies* and I’m completely *defenseless*.” When Lupin didn’t respond to this, Black yelled, “You could help, you know!”

“Hm, I guess you’re right.” Despite his words, Lupin didn’t budge, and at that moment, Severus decided he was quite glad he’d agreed to be Lupin’s friend.

“James? Are you the one responsible for this? Take off your cloak and face me like a man! I’m warning you--” Just then, the toothbrushes leaped into Black’s mouth, deep enough to stop him from speaking but without cutting off his airways.

Lupin turned to Severus, and his eyes practically glowed. “Wanna get out of here?”

Severus nodded, casting one last *scorgio* on the remaining cauldrons before Lupin took his hand and dragged him out the door.

## Chapter 5

Severus and Lupin ran down the hall, only stopping when Lupin pulled them into a passageway Severus had never seen before. It was dark, and they weren't holding hands anymore, but they were close enough that Severus could feel Lupin's warmth.

"Where did that come from?" Lupin asked through his laughter.

Severus was laughing too, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd done so. "It was research. Black may not be able to see me, but my magic certainly still affects him." That wasn't really his motivation, and Lupin knew it, but it was still partially true. Severus had gotten nervous after the levitation charm on the letter had failed to affect Lily's reality. Thankfully, it appeared that was a special case. Perhaps communication had different rules? Because *of course* it did. It was difficult enough that he was invisible and inaudible but apparently the curse didn't even have the decency to be consistent. Then again, he guessed he already knew that. It wasn't consistent enough to work on Lupin, after all. His attempt at disgruntlement was undercut by the thrill he felt at their proximity.

"I'll say. That spell with the cauldrons? Brilliant."

Severus smirked, pride bubbling up inside him at the compliment. "I created that one myself."

Instead of responding, Lupin drew Severus into a hug and spun him in a circle. "It was incredible," he said breathlessly, arms still loosely wrapped around Severus. "You're incredible."

Certain his face was burning, Severus was grateful for the darkness. It was almost like being invisible, but in Lupin's arms, he wasn't worried about not being real. Instead, he felt warm and confident and impulsive, like he could do anything and there would be no consequences. He had gotten his long-overdue revenge on Black, and Black couldn't do anything to hurt him in return. Although it wasn't enough to make up for years of torment, it felt liberating all the same, and it was even better knowing someone could share in his small act of vengeance. Lupin hadn't scolded him or told him to cut it out--he had *laughed*. Severus wanted to remember that sound forever.

There was a vindictive part of Severus that considered his new friendship with Lupin to be part of that revenge. Seeing the way Lupin's eyes lit up with surprise and amusement and *awe* when Severus sent Black fearfully scurrying from the cauldrons, knowing Lupin could finally see the treachery deep in Black's veins...it made Severus feel seen. Lily, for all of her goodness, hadn't understood. She had brushed his concerns aside and called him obsessed. But Lupin, like Severus, had been faced with the rotten side of Black, and he had chosen to turn against him. Although Lupin was the one who asked to be Severus' friend, it didn't diminish the voice in Severus' head that said that he had *won*. That he had *taken* Lupin from Black. Lupin had chosen Severus over his fellow Gryffindors when even Lily couldn't pick a side, and Severus wanted to express his victory.



Without letting himself think about it too much, he did so, stepping closer and wrapping his arms tight around the werewolf. Remus returned the embrace. Maybe it was his imagination, but Severus thought he could feel Remus' pulse underneath the heat of his skin, rapid and rhythmic. Still giddy with the confirmation that he was *alive*, Severus wanted to match his heart to that beat. He buried his face in Remus' neck and pushed closer until the werewolf was backed up against a wall.

Remus let out a soft sound when his back hit stone, shifting his grip so that Severus was supporting some of his weight--like he was worried he might collapse if Severus let go. Severus' heart thrummed at the thought that Remus might need him as much as Severus needed Remus, so he pressed further, fitting their bodies together until they were as close as possible. The contact made Severus feel real, and Remus' reactions made him feel necessary, and Severus wanted both of those things more than he could explain.

Remus' breathing was shaky, and it stopped completely when Severus nuzzled into his neck. Severus had a flashback to a nightmare--of wolf jaws bared over his throat, ready to snap--but instead of recoiling, he took the wolf's place. He let his teeth graze the scarred skin on Remus' neck. Remus inhaled sharply and shifted to give him better access, and Severus felt in control for the first time since the full moon. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't powerless. He wasn't dead. He wasn't alone.

A sob ripped past his teeth at the flood of emotions he felt, and he shut his mouth to keep any other embarrassing sounds from escaping. But then his lips were brushing against Remus' neck instead of his teeth, and a different kind of desire shot through him. For a few moments, Severus stood frozen. Then slowly, awareness of the position they were in crept over him, and he pushed away as if he'd been burned, legs unsteady beneath him. Remus made a noise almost like a growl, and Severus didn't know what that meant, but he knew it had to be bad. Or perhaps it was just the universe righting itself after Severus' attempt at inversion. The wolf was a wolf once more, and the sheep in wolf's clothing was vulnerable to his attacks.

Severus' thoughts raced as he tried to make out Remus' expression, but in the dark, he could only see a glint of eyes and a glimmer of teeth. His throat tightened as the flashbacks started up again, this time real memories instead of nightmares. He tried to think past them, to quiet them with facts. It wasn't a full moon. Remus wasn't transformed. He wasn't a wolf.

"Severus?"

The voice was human, allowing the flashbacks to fade enough for Severus to think--to remember his other concerns. Had Remus realized what Severus had been doing? Was he disgusted by Severus? Would he try to hurt him? He didn't need to be a wolf to cause Severus harm--he'd proven that countless times over the years. Before Severus could find out, or make even more of a fool of himself, he darted out of the passageway.

His heart was racing faster than he thought possible as he made his way through the halls, as if it was trying to outrun both Remus and the wolf separately. Severus didn't know which scared him more. The latter was more lethal, but at least it was mindless. It killed when it smelled prey. The former had to be provoked. And Severus hated himself for provoking it.

*You just had to go and ruin the one good thing in your life right now, didn't you? You always fuck everything up.*

Remus had asked to be friends. He had offered to help. He was going to tell *Lily*, and things were going to be better and maybe even okay.

*But instead you acted like a bloody queer.*

It was his father's voice in his head that time, and Severus felt the urge to empty his stomach on the stone floor. He stopped in the hallway, leaning against the wall for support before deciding that sliding to the ground was probably a better idea. Remus would never speak to him now. He wouldn't tell Lily the truth, and Severus would be alone and invisible and not-really-here until one day he wasn't here at all. His skin felt dirty everywhere they had touched, and at that moment, Severus wished he didn't have a corporeal form after all.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus stood alone in that dark corridor for several minutes after Severus left, heart racing in a way it shouldn't during a hug. If he could even call what had just happened a 'hug'. It had certainly started out that way, but Remus' brain went a little fuzzy after that, and he couldn't quite remember if he or Severus was responsible for the unexpected turn their embrace had taken. Then again, since Severus was the one who had fled in disgust, it was probably Remus.

Remus let his head fall back against the stone with a thwack, trying to make sense of his chaotic emotions. He felt embarrassed and anxious and *aroused*, the last of which he wasn't quite ready to think about right now. But most of all, he felt guilty. Guilty for pushing Severus into a friendship when he didn't want one. Guilty for proving that Severus' apprehension was warranted--that they shouldn't be friends, that Remus would only mess things up. All of that piled onto the guilt that still hadn't abandoned him since the last full moon, and Remus knew he really should have just left Hogwarts immediately after the "prank".

As he pushed himself off the wall and stepped out of the passageway, certainty swelled up from his core. He would pack tonight and leave in the morning. It was safer that way, for the other students, for the professors, for every Hogsmeade resident who enjoyed evening strolls. Everyone would be better off without him. James and Sirius were best friends, so James would choose Sirius over Remus in a heartbeat if this fight lasted any longer, and Peter would always find the most popular person to attach himself to--which certainly wasn't Remus. And Severus...

Remus stopped walking. He was such an *idiot*. Everyone else might be better off without him, but Severus wouldn't. Severus was *invisible*, and it was Remus' job to tell Lily that tomorrow night. Even if Severus would prefer to never talk to him again, Remus needed to help him in whatever way he could, especially since Remus wasn't yet convinced that Severus' situation wasn't his fault somehow.

By the time Remus stepped through the portrait, he had tottered back over into "stay at Hogwarts" territory, and that only made him feel even worse, like he was making up excuses to justify the result he wanted. Because he *wanted* to stay--even if he didn't have any friends, and James, Sirius, and Peter all turned on him. Even if he was a danger to people. And he *hated* that about himself. Why couldn't he be selfless and brave like a Gryffindor was supposed to be? Wouldn't the brave thing be to leave? To sacrifice his opportunities, his friends, and everything that made his life worth living in order to make sure he never took all of that away from anyone else? Why couldn't he do that?

"Moony!" Peter called out, breaking Remus from his spiral of self-loathing. Breathless, the small boy ran toward him and skidded to a stop. "Hi, um, so this is kind of awkward since I think you're avoiding me right now...and also James...and definitely Sirius...but I need your help." His cheeks were flushed pink and he was gesturing wildly, even though he hadn't said anything yet that required gestures. "Sirius came back from detention furious with James--something about

invisibility cloaks and spiders brushing his teeth? And now they're fighting, and it's not their usual yell-at-each-other-and-throw-a-few-punches-or-wrestle-until-the-issue-is-resolved thing. It's like a hundred times worse!"

Remus winced. "What could possibly be worse than that?"

Peter's eyes were wide, and he lowered his voice like the information might break Remus if it was a few decibels too loud. "They're not talking to each other. *At all.*"

Remus tried to give the appropriate reaction despite the loud sigh he was voicing internally. "Oh no."

Peter nodded fervently. "So you've gotta come talk some sense into them. Or just start playing James' guitar or something. I can't take the silence."

Remus' lips twitched in spite of everything. "Alright, Pete. I'll figure something out."

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Peter hesitated before adding, "Just to clarify, *are* you avoiding me?"

Remus gave him a pat on the shoulder. "I've been giving myself some space to think lately, but I'm not avoiding you specifically."

"Good, because if Prongs and Padfoot don't end their silence battle soon, I'm going to need someone to talk to so I don't go crazy."

*Oh yes, there's another thing to add to your list of problems. You're going crazy.* Remus supposed that made his previous rationale for staying at Hogwarts a little less convincing. And the fact that Snape's presence as an invisible, inaudible person gave Remus a reason to stay made it even more likely that Severus was just a hallucination his brain dreamt up to justify his bad behavior. Merlin, Remus' head was a disaster.

Sighing to himself, he started up the stairs to his dormitory. James and Sirius were nowhere to be seen but their bed curtains were closed, so it seemed they were moping separately. Remus reached for his wand to cast a white noise charm, but it wasn't there. He forgot he had left it with Slughorn. Too tired to deal with that at the moment, Remus went over to Padfoot's record player and put on the only classical record in his collection. Peter expressed his gratitude by waltzing his way into bed, leaving Remus alone with his thoughts.

Since his roommates were tucked away behind their curtains, Remus didn't feel the need to hide while he changed into his pajamas. He usually went into the bathroom to dress, even though it was unnecessary now since they had all seen his scars. Worse than the scars, they saw him ripped open and murderous and bloody each month. Given that experience, changing in front of them shouldn't be a problem, but it only made Remus more inclined to keep up the habit in order to separate himself from the wolf in their minds. He wanted to be as human as possible when he had the option, to claim that tiny amount of control.

Remus remembered when Sirius had asked him in their second year why he didn't change in their room like everyone else. It had been before Sirius discovered his secret, so Remus had just told him he was shy. Sirius had studied him with a small frown on his face and asked, "So it's not because your parents hit you?" Eyes wide, Remus had quickly assured him that wasn't the case. Sirius nodded, but it was clear he didn't believe him. It wasn't until much later that Remus realized what it meant for a twelve-year-old to immediately jump to that conclusion.

When James had asked a few months later if Remus didn't change in front of them because he was

secretly a girl, Sirius had told him to knock it off. Remus shot him a grateful smile when James wasn't looking, and after that, Sirius started calling Remus over to their spot at the table in the Great Hall during meals, and asking his opinion on pranks, and visiting him in the hospital when he returned from "visiting his mother." It wasn't long before Sirius, James, and Peter discovered Remus' secret. Instead of recoiling in fear or telling everyone he was a monster, they formed the Marauders, and Remus learned for the first time what it was like to have friends.

Thinking of that now, Remus' heart ached. He missed Sirius, and James, and Peter, and he wanted to go back to when they were a united front. He missed having friends he knew would have his back. Recent events had proven he never really had that, so he supposed he just missed his ignorance.

And yet, even as he wished for simpler times, he felt a level of disgust at what the Marauders had been. Remus had given everything in order to not be alone, and that included his morals. He had joined in their bullying--of anyone they judged weak enough, of *Severus*. He had let them lead him into the forest on the full moon where he could hurt people--where he almost *did* hurt people. Their close calls were accidents, but the bullying wasn't. And he could have said "no" to both. He *should* have said "no" many times, but he didn't want to disappoint them after all they had done to make him feel welcome, human, loved. How could he turn against them when they had shown him leniency, shown him *friendship*, despite knowing what he was? They were so proud of themselves for becoming Animagi, for creating the Marauder's Map, all to help him. How could he tell them "no" after that?

But then, Dumbledore had shown him kindness as well, and Remus had thanked him by abusing his position as Prefect and escaping the accommodations he provided for full moons. It wasn't out of gratitude that he went along with the Marauders' plans, but out of fear. Fear of loneliness, isolation, and everything else his condition promised life would be. He had become a monster in order to have people in his life who told him he wasn't one. And he had *enjoyed* it, even though he knew it was wrong. Because friends were something he never thought he would get to have, and he liked the way it felt to receive their smiles, their laughter, their physical affection. He lived for those blissful stolen moments, and he didn't know how he was going to survive without them.

Pained by the bleakness of his future and memories of his past, Remus decided he couldn't think about the Marauders anymore. Instead, he turned to the books on his bedside table, seeking a distraction. They were mostly Muggle books his mother had gifted him, and he was grateful for it. They helped ground him, as if connecting with his non-magical heritage meant stepping away, not only from Hogwarts, but from his lycanthropy as well. With that desire in mind, he scanned the titles. He wouldn't be able to focus on Kropotkin in his current mental state, but Emma Goldman was fairly readable. Then he noticed his wand was there beside the stack of books. Remus supposed he had Sirius to thank for that, as well as for the conflicted thoughts that washed over him once again.

It suddenly seemed impossible to try and read with the ruckus in his head, so for a few minutes, Remus just let the music from the record player wash over him. He had insisted they needed at least one classical record since classical music was supposed to improve memory when studying. Of course, when he said that, Sirius had balked at him until Remus promised to buy him the latest Queen album in return. When Remus agreed, Sirius had told him--

Remus pulled his curtains closed and cast a silencing charm. Apparently music wouldn't work either. Why was it so difficult to just *stop thinking*? He didn't want to remember good things about Sirius. Or the other Marauders. Or Hogwarts. It would only make it harder to leave.

Remus would tell Dumbledore his plan to drop out tomorrow night after his talk with Lily. He



would do his duty to Severus by giving him a better friend to take his place, and then he would do his duty to Hogwarts by leaving forever. As for what to say to Lily, Remus had no idea. How was he supposed to explain that her best friend was here but invisible? That Remus was the only one who could see him? Especially when Remus himself wasn't sure it was true? The more time he spent outside of Severus' presence, the more certain he felt that this was all in his head.

But then, if Severus wasn't here, who had made the cauldrons crawl and the toothbrushes attack? Had it really been James, like Sirius thought? It was odd, especially since James hadn't revealed himself as the culprit, which was how every Marauder-on-Marauder prank ended, since bragging was half the fun. Then again, Remus had left early, so perhaps James had popped out moments later. But what about the broom fiasco? Had the broom just gone rogue and flown up the stairs? That sounded ridiculous, but it was more likely than the existence of an imperceptible boy only Remus could see. It was certainly more likely than *Severus Snape* kissing his neck.

The thought of that brought heat rushing back to Remus' skin. He wondered if thinking about Severus would make him appear. Surely if he was only a hallucination, he would appear when Remus imagined his lips on his. Surely if he was in Remus' head, Severus would be here as Remus imagined them pressed together the way they had been in the passageway. Thinking about threading his fingers into Severus' hair was just...research, right? That's what Severus had said earlier. Remus couldn't be faulted for doing some research of his own.

With that flimsy justification in mind, he let his mind wander. He thought about the way Severus fit so well in his arms. Remus had always felt too tall for his own good--it made him more conspicuous everywhere he went--but he'd loved the feeling of enveloping Severus in his embrace. He'd loved breathing him in, and trying to identify the various scents that made up Severus. The most distinct smell was something earthy, like one of the roots they used in Potions. It reminded Remus of forests--where the most animal parts of Remus wanted to explore even as he knew he needed to hold himself back. He wasn't supposed to give in to the desire to run--to follow his instincts, or find pleasure in that loss of control. But forests made him want to. *Severus* made him want to.

Severus hadn't appeared.

Remus closed his eyes and imagined his lips again. He imagined them moving from his neck and down his chest, lower and lower until they were teasing his waistband. Thankful that he'd already put a silencing charm in place, Remus reached down to remove some of his clothing. He imagined Severus was doing it instead.

Still, Severus didn't appear.

Which was good, Remus reminded himself. It made it more likely that Severus really existed outside of Remus' head--either that or Remus' mind really hated him.

Since his research had technically been collected, Remus could have stopped then. He should have stopped. There was absolutely no reason to continue thinking about Severus Snape while he touched himself. Except...

Except images of Severus wouldn't leave him alone. So he gave in. He let them pervade his mind, wrap around him, fill him. The images were nothing like the possible-hallucination-Severus who had been with him in the passageway, but that only made Remus more confident in the realness of the memory. And oh, how he wanted Severus to be real. He thought of Severus' smile during detention, and his laughter afterward. He thought of the way Severus leaned into him as he shared the wonderful news that he wasn't dead--the way he had rushed to Remus to share what he'd discovered like he actually wanted to be friends, regardless of how much he had scowled about it in



the library. He thought of Severus flush against him in the dark, pressing impossibly closer, and real real *real*. Remus came with Severus' name on his lips.

When he finally caught his breath, he cleaned himself up with a wave of his wand, and then he just laid there for a while, trying not to think about what he'd done.

His thoughts eventually broke through his barrier of willpower, and Remus pressed the bases of his palms against his eyes. He wanted to push until his skull compressed and he never had to think again. All he'd wanted was to quiet the thoughts of self-loathing and the memories of the Marauders but his thoughts were anything but quiet now. His mind wasn't a safe place anymore when even his distractions created more problems. He had just wanked to the thought of Severus Snape. He had just wanked to the thought of a *boy*.

Remus already had enough on his plate between being-a-werewolf and dropping-out-of-school and possibly-losing-his-mind. He really didn't need to add questioning-his-sexuality to that list. Except that clearly he did. The more he thought about it, the more he realized he probably should have added that to his list a long time ago. *Oh, bugger.*

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

As Severus made his way back to Slytherin, he was hoping for a distraction from the mistakes he'd made with Lupin. A distraction from the way touching Lupin had made him feel. Unhelpfully, Severus heard Mulciber's voice up ahead. It was in that perfect, low tone that always made Severus' head spin. It made him feel like he was the center of the cosmos, like Mulciber had eyes only for Severus.

But then, who was he using it on now?

Severus rounded the corner to see the younger Black--Regulus?--there with Mulciber. Mulciber was somehow leaning one shoulder against the stone wall while also leaning into Regulus' personal space, just enough to be unnerving, or very very attractive, depending on whether Regulus was as much of a fucking disaster as Severus was. From the look on Regulus' face and the way his toes pointed toward Mulciber instead of away, Severus thought that might be the case.

Severus found he didn't feel jealous--just used. Mulciber hadn't once inquired after Severus, even though he had pretended they were friends when Severus had been there. Avery, meanwhile, glanced over at Severus' bed every morning and evening as if hoping Severus would re-appear. But if Mulciber didn't really care for any of them, why had he toyed with Severus? Why was he toying with Regulus now? Was it just a game? Did he pick out the queers and then use his knowledge to embarrass them, hold power over them? Severus felt sick at the idea that other people had noticed his...interest. It made it seem more real, less deniable.

Severus walked toward the two Slytherins cautiously, but not because he was worried they would hear him. As far as he could tell, his footsteps didn't make any noise--opening and closing doors sometimes caused alarm, but any sound or movement contained to Severus' own form went unnoticed. No, he walked cautiously because he was afraid of what he would hear. Something about the look in Mulciber's eyes...

"...to meet the Dark Lord this weekend, and I'd like for you to come with us."

So Mulciber was toying with them in an attempt to get them to join the Dark Lord. But why? What did he gain from getting others to join? Was the Dark Lord putting him up to it? Did he reward those who recruited others? Did he approve of these...methods? The idea of the Dark Lord instructing Mulciber to seduce new followers made his cause seem illegitimate. Dirty. At least, that's how Severus felt for almost falling for it.

"Would you like that, Regulus?"

Regulus nodded, and Severus envied the way he maintained his poise with no difficulty at all. Severus always had to try so much harder than the rich purebloods at everything aside from magic, but it was the most obvious when it came to looking unaffected. Severus twitched and scowled and swore and flushed far too easily, only noticing once it was too late to avoid it. Regulus, on the other hand, held his head high and kept his face stoic. Severus decided he would master that skill someday.

"I'd like that very much," Regulus said. His voice was soft, still filled with boyishness and youth, and it felt wrong for him to be selling his soul to anyone, let alone the man people were calling the most powerful wizard to ever live. Severus could handle it, but he'd dealt with more pain and suffering in one week than Regulus probably had in his entire life. What would Regulus do if the Dark Lord punished him? If he tortured him until he couldn't scream anymore? Severus heard that happened sometimes, even to the most loyal followers. Severus could deal with that--if it meant leaving behind the shame of his Muggle father. Severus would put up with any number of affronts to his personal wellbeing if it meant being surrounded by people who saw his talents instead of his blood status, his poverty, his ugliness. That's what Mulciber said the Dark Lord would ensure.

"Good," Mulciber said with a smile. "You know, your parents will be so proud of you. After what your brother did..."

"He's not my brother," Regulus stated, and for the first time, Severus saw a flicker of emotion in his eyes. Apparently he wasn't as stoic as he seemed.

"Of course," Mulciber soothed. "But he's placed a bit of a...spot on your reputation, and joining the Dark Lord will fix that. It will restore the Black family to prestige--show that you don't mingle with Mudbloods, Muggles, or half-bloods. The Dark Lord will make sure purebloods reign once again, and if you stand with us now, that filthy blood traitor will be forgotten. Then when the time comes, we'll reign together."

Severus stared, wishing he could go up to Mulciber and call him on his bullshit—demand that he explain himself. Surely Severus had heard wrong. Surely Mulciber hadn't just told Regulus the exact opposite of what he'd told Severus.

Mulciber leaned in close to Regulus' ear, applying a second meaning to his promise of "together," beyond reigning with their fellow purebloods. "See you this weekend." Severus thought he could see Regulus shiver.

And then Mulciber left, and all of the puppet strings holding Regulus to attention broke. The younger boy didn't look upset or angry, just tired, and perhaps a little relieved. Maybe he wasn't as perfect on the inside as he was in public, and he was just glad to have survived another performance. Or maybe he thought his brother had ruined his chances of joining the Dark Lord, and he was simply pleased to still be included in the future they were building. But then again, maybe he had just been worried Mulciber was going to bite him with how close he'd been standing before. Apparently Severus wasn't the best at reading people.

After all, he hadn't been able to see through the lies Mulciber told him until everyone else could

see through Severus. He hadn't noticed the way he was being dragged along by false promises, teased with a future no one was fighting for. Brain whirring and convictions crumbling, Severus followed after Mulciber, leaving Regulus to put his mask back on in private.

## Chapter 6

Remus hadn't seen Severus all day. He knew he was probably just researching (or not-existing, the annoyingly rational part of his brain added), but it made him anxious all the same. Not that he wanted to see him--even thinking about the disgust that would no doubt be on Severus' face made Remus want to run and hide. But after what happened last night, Remus should apologize at the very least, and he definitely needed to tell him he was leaving Hogwarts.

When 8:00 pm rolled around, Remus headed to the library where he told Lily to meet. Severus wasn't in his usual spot, and Remus wondered if he should have been more explicit about his wish for Severus to join them. He had assumed Severus would be researching at this time of night, so he hadn't invited him, but now that seemed incredibly stupid. Explaining to Lily that her best friend was okay but invisible would be a lot harder without even the hallucination of Severus there to reassure him. But he could manage it--he had to. If Severus never wanted to talk to him again after what happened last night, that would be more than justified, and Remus had no right to be upset. He would be leaving Hogwarts tomorrow anyway. No matter how difficult it was to do this alone, he would make sure Lily knew everything Severus wanted her to know before then.

Taking a seat at a table deep in the library where no one would come across him by accident, Remus pulled out the notes he'd written yesterday.

"Alright, what's the deal?" Lily asked. She sat down so quickly Remus wondered if she'd been there the whole time. Perfect. More evidence that Remus was going crazy. "Was he kidnapped? Taken to St. Mungo's? Did he set something on fire and get expelled?" Lily dropped her face into her hands. "I knew I was a bad influence on him."

Remus blinked. "What?"

Lily didn't pull her face out of her hands. "Just tell me already, I can't take it. The suspense is too much to bear."

"Okay, um..." Suddenly this whole thing seemed ridiculous. "Sorry, er. I thought he would be here tonight, which would have made this make more sense."

Lily straightened finally, looking at him hopefully. "He's here at Hogwarts?"

"Yes." Remus frowned. "Sort of."

Lily gaped at him. "You're killing me, Lupin. *Spit it out.*"

"Right, okay! Um," Remus looked at his notes, "he wants me to tell you that he's here, but no one can see or hear him, except me. And he can move things, but when he tried to write you a letter, it disintegrated before you could read it. And also--"

“Is this some kind of a sick joke?” When Remus glanced up, Lily was angrier than he’d ever seen her. She looked fragile, emotions simmering just beneath the surface of her face like rough water under thin ice. “What the *fuck*, Lupin?”

He could see the similarities between her and Severus, even just in the way she cursed at him, with emphasis on the swear word like she’d said it enough times for it to lose its impact unless she stressed it. He wished Severus was there to tell him how much he was *fucking* this up. Maybe he’d have an idea of how to fix it.

“It’s not a joke,” Remus said carefully. “Something happened the other night, and since then, Severus hasn’t been seen by anyone. Except he’s *here*. I’ve talked to him. He was trying to leave a letter on your bed that day when I went in your room, but it disintegrated the moment he placed it on your pillow.”

The mention of his bizarre trip to the girls’ dormitory gave her pause. Remus was suddenly grateful for his inability to look innocent that day. Lily’s suspicion then might be his saving grace now. She opened and closed her mouth like she wanted to curse at him some more but also wanted him to be telling the truth. “You’re not lying to me? This isn’t a prank?”

Remus looked at her, trying to convey as much earnesty as he could muster. “I’m telling you exactly what I’ve seen.” He didn’t want to say ‘I’m telling the truth’ since he wasn’t sure any of this was true, but telling her he was seeing things? That was certainly not a lie.

Just then, Remus caught sight of Severus approaching. Before he could remember to dread their reunion, his jaw dropped. Severus had his hair pulled back, and he was wearing Muggle clothes instead of his robes.

“What are you *wearing*?” he asked.

Severus rolled his eyes. “It’s not as if anyone can see me. What does it matter if I’m wearing my robes or not?”

*I can see you*, Remus thought, taking in the sight of Severus in jeans and a T-shirt. It was doing something to Remus’ brain that he couldn’t quite define. “You’re late,” he said dumbly, even though he wasn’t sure Severus could be late to a meeting Remus forgot to invite him to.

Severus didn’t seem bothered by this technicality. “I lost track of time. It happens when there are no classes to attend or people to miss me.”

Lily had spun in her seat, trying to catch sight of whoever Remus was talking to. Once she decided no one was there, she turned back to face Remus. She looked angry again. “I was just starting to believe you, but now I’m sure you’re just having a laugh.”

“It’s not a joke,” Remus repeated patiently. “Severus just showed up.”

“In some scandalous outfit? That’s ridiculous.” She started to stand. “Next time you want to hurt someone like this, you could at least try to be more believable.”

Remus looked to Severus for help. Severus gestured at his shirt. “He’s not wearing something scandalous,” Remus objected.

Lily sighed, but she stopped trying to leave. It seemed as if some part of her still wanted to believe him. Remus would just have to make that part a bit louder.

When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. “He’s wearing Muggle clothes. A Queen T-shirt and



jeans.”

Lily’s eyes widened, and she sunk back into her chair. “I gave him that shirt.”

Severus decided it was the right time to join them and pulled out a seat at the table. Lily stared at the chair, dumbfounded.

“Did you tell her I miss her?”

“He misses you,” Remus said softly.

Lily’s eyes glistened. “I miss him, too.” She looked at the place where Severus was sitting and tried again. “I really really miss you.” Then, glancing at Remus, she asked, “Can I touch him?”

Remus frowned. Severus shrugged, but there was curiosity in his eyes, and perhaps a bit of hope. “I’m not sure. You could try?”

Remus took Severus’ hand in his, causing Severus to jump. Remus realized belatedly that although he was necessary for communication, he wasn’t exactly needed for this. Shooting Severus an apologetic look at his blunder--which Severus promptly ignored--Remus guided his hand toward Lily’s. When he placed it on top of hers, it went straight through.

Severus made a horrified sound as his *limb* went through *solid matter*, and Lily slumped in her seat when she saw the look on Remus’ face and didn’t feel anything in her hand.

“Sorry,” Remus said, because he didn’t know what else to do.

Lily studied her hands as if this was their fault. “So if what you’re telling me is true, and I’m not completely convinced it is yet...how do we fix it?”

“We don’t know,” Remus took a deep breath. “That’s actually part of what I wanted to talk to you about. How much do you know about what happened the other night?”

Lily furrowed her brows. “I asked Slughorn, and all he told me was that Dumbledore was handling everything and that Potter saved Sev’s life.”

“The part about James is true,” Remus said, swallowing. “But you need to know that James saved him from me.”

Severus stared at him in shock. Lily just looked confused.

“It was a full moon, and Sirius told Severus how to get into the Shrieking Shack. Which is where I--” Remus fought down the urge to vomit. He’d never told anyone his secret before. The Marauders had figured it out on their own, and Severus had seen it first hand. He didn’t know how to do this, but he needed to tell Lily, just in case it helped figure out what was going on with Severus. She’d need to know all the details for when Remus left. “It’s where I transform.”

Lily paled, and Remus knew she’d put the pieces together. “Sev was right. He was sure you were a...” she lowered her voice, “...a werewolf all this time, but I didn’t believe him. Did you--” Lily looked sorry for whatever she was about to ask. “Did you hurt him?”

Remus felt a familiar spark of anxiety at hearing the question he so often asked himself, but he pushed it down and shook his head. “No, James saved him before I could cause any damage. He took him inside the castle to get checked by Madam Pomfrey and talk to Dumbledore, and no one but me has seen him since.”

Lily was thinking, and Remus could see the cogs turning in her head. “Why are you telling me this?”

Remus studied the wood of the table. “Because I’m leaving Hogwarts. I don’t want to put anyone else in danger. But you need to know everything so you can help him.” Remus couldn’t look at Severus as he spoke. He didn’t want to know if he was relieved or scared or furious.

Lily, however, made sure Remus looked at her. “You’re not leaving Hogwarts,” she said firmly.

“I--”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. You’ve convinced yourself you’re doing the right thing by removing yourself from the picture, but you’re leaving Severus here to deal with all of this by himself.”

“That’s why I’m telling you--”

“I can’t *talk* to him, Remus! How am I supposed to help him when we can’t even write letters to each other? When I have no way of telling if he’s here beyond your word that he is?”

Remus didn’t have an answer to that.

“You think you’re being brave, but really, you’re just being a coward. As far as I can tell, if you’re the only one who can see him and this happened after you almost hurt him--” She paused in her tirade to shoot him a sympathetic look. “--even though it wasn’t your fault--then you’re just as much a part of this as he is.”

The words she was saying made a strange amount of sense, but it was the anger that really made him believe her. It was easy to believe he should leave when his own justifications were the only reason for staying, but it was harder to believe leaving was the right choice when he saw how angry it made someone else. When he saw how much it hurt her.

He couldn’t make eye contact with either of them, but after a few moments of consideration, he said, “Okay. I’ll stay.” After all of his conflicting emotions over the past week, it felt strange to be sure of something, but he knew he would stick to that decision.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Once Lupin decided to stay--a choice Severus had a lot of complicated feelings about--Lily suggested that they catch her up on their research so far. Severus was still so baffled at the idea of Lily being here with him--*believing* in him--that he could barely focus on the explanation Lupin was giving. It didn’t help that, whenever possible, Severus looked anywhere but at Lupin to avoid thinking about the events from last night he wished they could both forget.

“...not dead, since I can still touch him, and when people die, the soul and body separate...”

Severus couldn’t stop reliving the memory of his hand passing through Lily’s. He had considered testing his tangibility before now as part of his research, but he had been too afraid of this outcome. Now he knew, and he wished he didn’t. It was *wrong*, so utterly and completely wrong. He felt shaky and unsubstantial. Lupin’s unexpected honesty about being a werewolf and his intention to leave Hogwarts distracted Severus momentarily from his plight, but now that the conversation had become less interesting, the anxiety slipped back into place. He gripped the table, trying to prove to

himself that he was real.

“What did the professors say about it?” Lily asked. “And Madam Pomfrey?”

Even in his low-level panic, Severus scoffed. “Like the professors care. Dumbledore let a werewolf nearly kill me, and instead of punishing Black or expelling Lupin,” Severus paused to look at Remus to gauge his reaction, but he didn’t look offended (probably because he agreed, if he was willing to leave Hogwarts because of it), “he cast a spell to make sure I wouldn’t tell anyone what happened.” The minute the words left his mouth, it all clicked. “*Fuck.*”

“What...” Lupin started before trailing off. “You don’t think Dumbledore...?”

“Dumbledore what?” Lily asked. “What did I miss?”

Severus gestured for Lupin to translate while he thought back to that night in Dumbledore’s office. The events of the evening were blurry at best, beyond the terrors in the Shack that came back to him in nightmares. He had, intentionally or unintentionally, blocked out everything he could, and apparently that meant suppressing something very important. What spell had Dumbledore cast? And what had he said to him exactly? Something about the secret staying between him and Lupin, and then--

“That’s it,” Severus said aloud, interrupting whatever Lupin was telling Lily. “It has to be.”

“Are you sure Dumbledore would do something like this?” Lupin asked.

“Surely not,” Lily said, aghast.

“Bloody Gryffindors,” Severus muttered. “He made some weird comment about how help would find me, even if it seemed like no one could see or hear me. Even if he wasn’t responsible for this, he certainly knew about it and did nothing to stop it.”

Lupin relayed this to Lily who processed it slowly--Severus could see the progression through disbelief and denial to begrudging acceptance in her facial expressions. “Okay, if that’s true, then why?”

“To protect my secret, most likely,” Lupin said easily, and Severus nodded in confirmation. “Although this is a horrible way to do it.”

“So how do we fix it?” Lily asked. “Or get Dumbledore to?”

They all pondered in silence for a while, wearing matching slumps in their shoulders. If Dumbledore cast the spell, it was unlikely anyone else could undo it. As much as Severus disliked the man, he could admit he was a powerful wizard. And if he cast the spell, he would only undo it when he was ready. *If* he was ever ready. It would hardly surprise Severus if this was intended as a permanent solution. Then Dumbledore would never have to confront the bullying, or the attempted murder, or any of it. Out of sight, out of mind...

After several minutes, Lupin straightened. “If Dumbledore did this to protect my secret, then I’ll just have to make sure it’s not a secret anymore.”

Severus stared at him. “By coming out to the whole school?”

For some reason, Severus’ comment made Lupin blush a furious shade of red, causing his scars to look brighter in contrast. “Um, by telling everyone I’m a werewolf, yes.”

When they glanced over to gauge Lily's reaction, she was glaring again. "Will you *please* stop trying to sacrifice yourself for no reason?"

"It's not for no reason," Lupin protested. "If that's what it takes to fix this for Severus, then it'll be worth it."

Severus couldn't believe Lupin would offer to do that for him. He would be chased out of the school by an angry mob before the day was out, and if he survived that, even angrier parents would ensure he never stepped foot in wizarding society ever again.

"Admittedly, I agree with you." Lily didn't look happy about that concession. "But the part I have a problem with is that this is your *first solution*. Why are you so convinced you have to punish yourself to help Sev?"

"Because I should be punished!" Lupin exclaimed. "If James hadn't been there, I would have killed him, and I can't be sure I won't kill someone else in the future. Severus has already been traumatized and nearly murdered by me, and now for some reason, he's the one being punished? How is that right? Why *shouldn't* I be punished?" Remus seemed to realize how loud he was being once it was too late to change his volume. He shut his mouth instead.

Lily looked sad as she studied him, and Severus recognized that look as the one she gave Severus whenever he told her something his father had said. "Your condition isn't your fault." Her voice was soft but certain.

"I trusted the wrong people," Lupin replied. "That was my fault." He looked away from her then, turning to face Severus instead. "If you want me to tell everyone, I'll do it."

Severus could feel Lily's eyes in his direction, but she would never know that he didn't look back at her. He needed to tell the truth, even if Lily wouldn't approve. Even if he wasn't completely sure what the truth was. He thought about how easy it would be to let Lupin make the sacrifice. There was still a sliver of anger that Severus couldn't erase, couldn't minimize, couldn't ignore. Not because of the Shrieking Shack--Severus was sure by now that Lupin wasn't responsible for that--but because of the years of bullying that had preceded it. It would be easy to let Lupin punish himself for everything, especially if it meant Severus could truly exist again.

But then he thought about what that would mean, and Severus realized he didn't want Remus to leave. He didn't want Remus to spend the rest of his life isolated and impoverished because of Severus. As pathetic as it was, he didn't want to never see him again.

"Don't," he said finally. "We'll...think of something else."

Remus studied him, as if expecting him to change his mind, but then he turned back to Lily. "Okay. What other ideas do we have?"

Lily smiled at Lupin, and then in Severus' direction. It was a little off, but Severus felt warmed by it all the same.

"We could always just ask him nicely?" Lily said. Severus could see the mirth in her eyes.

"It's actually not a bad idea," Lupin said. Severus expressed his distaste by groaning. "At least to rule it out."

"Fine," Severus muttered. "But only so I can feel properly justified in my withering anger at him."

Remus laughed. "Tomorrow then."

“Great!” Lily said cheerfully. She gathered her things and then reached toward Severus as if to try to touch him once more. Her hand passed through his shoulder and he recoiled. Her face crumpled at the way his chair shifted backward. “Bye Sev,” she said quickly, turning away from him as if it hurt too much to know he was there and not be able to see him. “Remus, are you heading back to Gryffindor?”

Remus was looking at Severus, and Severus wished he would move closer, hold his hand, or press their knees together to make him feel real again. He hated how much he needed him--how lost and immaterial he felt without physical contact.

“Not just yet. Figured I’d finish up some homework.” Remus gestured at his backpack as if in explanation.

Lily looked skeptical, but she nodded slowly. “Alright. See you tomorrow.”

Severus was having trouble breathing. He felt like his lungs were missing, or shrinking until they popped out of existence like the rest of him.

“Bye, Lily.”

When she left, Severus stood. He tried to tell Lupin he was heading back to Slytherin, but his breath was coming too quickly for words to escape. His vision was swimming, and when he tried to grab the table for support, his hands shook so much the table rattled.

“Severus?” Remus asked, stepping toward him.

“I--” Severus tried, but he kept seeing his hand pass through Lily’s, Lily’s hand pass through his chest. Like there wasn’t a heart beating in his chest, but just air. Like *he* wasn’t anything but air.

“Can I touch you?” Remus asked, and Severus could hear the hesitance in his voice. He wondered if Remus was remembering the night before--if he was uncomfortable with the thought of touching Severus now, or worried Severus would start acting weird again if they touched.

Severus wanted to tell Remus he didn’t have to, that Severus would be okay, that Remus could go, but his throat closed up. He didn’t want Remus to leave. He didn’t want to be alone. “Please,” he choked out finally, and Remus’ arms wrapped around him.

Severus inhaled deeply, finding his breath in the space between Remus’ neck and shoulder. He focused on Remus’ hands, tight against the back of his ribcage, reassuring Severus that his heart was still in there somewhere, beating, keeping him alive. He let Remus’ legs hold them up since his own were still shaking, and he tried not to think about how weak he was--how helpless--to rely on someone else this much.

“Would you...” Remus started, and Severus knew he’d overstayed his welcome and that Remus was going to ask him to let go. Remus was probably disgusted with him. But instead, he asked, “Would you like to sleep in my bed tonight?”

“What?” Severus yelped and jumped back. Already, he felt less substantial, and his knees wobbled.

Remus was bright red again, but he didn’t back down. “It’s nearly curfew, so we can’t stay here, but I don’t want to leave you like this. We would just be sleeping, but if at any point you need a reminder that you’re real, I’ll be there.”

Severus knew he should say ‘no’. He didn’t want to be sleeping in the same room as Black and



Potter, even if he was invisible, and the idea of sharing a bed with a boy was...Okay, so maybe that idea wasn't completely abhorrent, but that was the *problem*. Severus was supposed to be ignoring his attraction, not encouraging it. And sleeping in Remus' bed would definitely encourage it.

But then Severus thought about the alternative. He didn't want to go back to Slytherin feeling like this. He would have to sleep in his cold bed and have nightmares of teeth, of claws, of howling, of fading into mist--if he could sleep at all with his breath shaking so much and his body feeling like it didn't belong to him. "Okay," he said quietly.

"You're sure?" Remus asked, and Severus wanted to curse him for making him repeat himself.

"Yes, I'm sure."

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus was grateful that the other Marauders weren't in their dorm when he and Severus arrived. They could have silently gotten ready for bed, but it was better to be able to talk.

"Here, you can borrow some pajama pants." They were the nicer of the two pairs Remus owned. Remus considered trying to find him a shirt as well, but Severus was already wearing a T-shirt. The way he was hugging his arms around himself made Remus think it might be good for him to keep something of Lily with him.

"Thanks." Severus took them without making eye contact, and Remus was already wondering if this was a terrible idea. Things were awkward enough after Remus' gaffe last night, but now he'd gone and taken advantage of the fact that Severus needed physical contact. Of course, Remus did genuinely want to help Severus, but it felt dirty or wrong somehow when that assistance would bring Remus more of a reward than it should. Should they talk about last night before climbing into bed together? It seemed like they should, but Lily had been there when they first saw each other, and now didn't feel like the right time. Severus was already anxious without bringing up everything that went wrong last time. But then again, maybe it would comfort him to set some boundaries?

Remus' indecision kept his concerns trapped in his throat. "Feel free to change in the bathroom," he said instead. "There should be some extra toothbrushes in there. Peter makes sure to have extras on hand since he discovered Sirius had been using his for a month after Sirius' got lost."

Severus snorted, and some of the tension went out of the room. When Severus left to get ready for bed, Remus changed into his own sleepwear, which consisted of a pair of moth-eaten flannel pajama pants and an old sweater. He felt embarrassed at having such worn clothing, but then he remembered that Severus couldn't really judge. He reminded himself that he wasn't supposed to care what Severus thought of his pajamas. They weren't *actually* sleeping together, after all. Severus could find him disgusting and it wouldn't matter. Severus probably *did* find him disgusting, but it didn't matter. This was about making sure Severus could actually get some rest instead of dissociating all night.

Once he was dressed, Remus went into the bathroom to brush his teeth, entering just as Severus was coming out.

When he returned, Severus was standing in the middle of the room, shivering. Remus walked

toward him, holding out his hand. Severus took it, staring at their linked appendages like Remus was the only thing tying him to reality. In a way, Remus supposed he was. Once Severus stopped trembling so much, they climbed into Remus' bed.

"Can we--" Severus paused to take a shaky breath. "Can we not turn off the lights just yet?"

Remus squeezed his hand and moved into a more comfortable sitting position. "Of course."

Severus settled in beside him, so they were both propped up against the headboard, arms touching and still holding hands. "It was good to see Lily," he said after a few moments.

Remus wondered for the first time if Severus was in love with her like James always said. The thought made his chest feel funny. "She really cares about you."

Severus nodded but didn't reply, although his grip on Remus' hand grew tighter. When Remus glanced over at him, his eyes were squeezed shut.

"We're going to fix this," Remus told him. "No matter what it takes."

Severus opened his eyes slowly. "Would you really have told everyone you're a werewolf if I'd asked you to?"

Remus looked him in the eyes, wanted him to see how sure he was. "I still will, if you've changed your mind."

Severus shook his head. "I don't want that." He sounded oddly irritated as he said it, and Remus wasn't sure if he was irritated with Remus or himself. "I used to. For years that was all I wanted: to get you and your friends expelled so you'd stop hurting me." His lip curled which made 'used to' seem like a very recent development. "I would have done anything to get you to leave me alone." A bitter laugh whistled through his nose, but halfway through, it became a strangled sob. He buried his head in Remus' shoulder, and for a while, he didn't say anything. When he finally spoke, his words were muffled against Remus' sweater, and it took Remus several seconds to figure out what he said: "I don't want to be alone."

Remus knew Severus was only saying that because he was invisible--because he needed *someone*, not because he needed Remus--but it made Remus' heart beat faster in his chest all the same. "I'm here," he said, pressing his cheek to Severus' hair. "I'm not going anywhere."

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Severus knew he'd made the right choice in giving in to his desire to stay with Remus. Remus' warmth, his solidity, even his breathing drew Severus back to earth whenever he started to feel incorporeal. Severus inhaled his scent, trying to work out the components. Perhaps pine? Maybe a hint of cinnamon? Definitely something wintry. Because *of course* Remus would smell like something from a holiday shop. He could tear a person in two in wolf-mode, but as a human, he was sweet and soft and...fuck. Nope nope nope. He was not going to go there. Remus was a bully and a coward and a fool, and now that Severus was thinking about it, Remus was *Lupin*. When had he been granted a first name? Why had Severus allowed that to happen? And why hadn't he noticed?

*Maybe if you weren't so obsessed with getting his hands on you, you would have remembered not*

*to be an idiot.*

Severus really preferred it when other people were idiots, and he could watch and deride them. Like Re-- *Lupin*. Lupin was an idiot. A self-sacrificing idiot who was willing to tell everyone his secret to help Severus. A stupid, foolish Gryffindor who was being too damn noble for his own good lately instead of being the bullying arsehole Severus used to know. Severus really didn't deserve the damage Lupin's personality change was doing to his sanity.

Since Severus was an idiot now as well apparently, he lifted his head to press his right cheek against Remus' left. When Remu-- *Lupin* sighed, Severus pulled back a bit to see his expression. He was smiling softly, and his eyes were half-closed. Relieved that he hadn't crossed a line, Severus returned to his previous position. Their closeness made him dizzy, and he thought about how easy it would be to shift over just a bit and brush his lips against Remus' -- *Lupin's*. Er, wait. Fuck. The name was not the biggest problem with that thought. Regardless of what he called the werewolf in his head, he wasn't supposed to be thinking about his mouth. He *definitely* wasn't supposed to be thinking about the soft friction of their lips as they ki--

Severus' mouth went dry.

*Nope. Nuh-uh. Not happening.*

For a moment, he wished he could scream without Remus hearing, because maybe a nice, blood-curdling self-lecture would help get his head on straight. But then he remembered to be careful what he wished for. If Remu--Lupin--*oh fuck it*. If Remus couldn't hear him, then he was really screwed.

He tried to think of something other than Remus' lips, but every time he breathed, there was a new scent to add to the list, and that only made it harder to keep himself from wondering what Remus tasted like. Severus pulled away again, this time to stop himself from doing something stupid.

But then he was looking into Remus' eyes, and really, this was worse, because he could also see Remus' lips, but now Remus could probably tell he was looking at his lips...

Instead of demanding that Severus stop being a pervert, Remus just smiled that sleepy sort of smile and reached up behind Severus' head. Severus couldn't figure out what he was doing at first, but then his hair fell around his face, and Remus handed Severus his hair tie. Slowly, as if to keep from scaring him off, Remus threaded his fingers through Severus' hair and massaged his scalp. Severus leaned into the touch, wondering why Remus was making not-kissing-him so difficult.

Just then, the door opened and the voices of Potter, Black, and Pettigrew filled the room. Remus cast a silencing charm on the curtains to keep the noise down, and when the lights turned off, they crawled under the covers. Severus--Salazar help him--wanted to touch Remus as he fell asleep, but he didn't want to overstep his bounds by reaching for him. Mercifully, Remus pulled him close so Severus didn't have to make the decision. Severus pretended to scowl, even if Remus couldn't see him in the dark. It was really more for his own benefit.

"Goodnight, Severus," Remus murmured.

In spite of his pretending, in spite of the fact that Potter and Black were somewhere outside of the bed curtain, in spite of *all* of the disasters that had led to this, Severus had never felt so warm or safe in his life. Which was tragic, he reminded himself. Pitiful, even. Certainly not romantic or something absurd like that. He scowled harder, but his voice was traitorously soft when he whispered, "Goodnight, Remus."

## Chapter 7

When Remus woke the next morning, he was happy to find that Severus was still there. More than happy, really. Severus looked so peaceful in sleep, with his head resting on Remus' chest. His right arm and leg were draped across Remus as well. There was a soft smile curving across his lips, and Remus found himself smiling in response. He couldn't decide if he wanted to wake Severus up to say 'good morning' or keep watching him sleep, but he knew that he wanted more mornings like this, and he was worried about what that meant.

Except he knew what it meant, and he also knew he couldn't have it. Severus was only here because of whatever curse he was under. He would never willingly touch Remus otherwise, and he certainly wouldn't sleep in his bed. So Remus gave himself a moment to feel everything he wanted to for Severus, and then he gently shook him awake. Remus had always known relationships weren't in the cards for him because of his condition. Realizing he was in love with a boy--and a boy who had every reason to hate him at that--only made the impossibility of it more clear.

"Good morning," Remus said. Knowing it would likely be his only chance to do so since Dumbledore would remove the spell later today, Remus pressed a--definitely platonic--kiss to Severus' hair.

Severus blinked his eyes open, but Remus couldn't tell if he registered where he was. Probably not, since he snuggled in closer. "Not morning yet," he murmured.

And wow, Severus was going to get decked in the face by Remus' heart jumping out of his chest if he didn't stop being so cute. Instead of taking the proper precautions and extracting himself from Severus' limbs, Remus wrapped his arms around Severus and nestled into his hair. "Alright. Ten more minutes."

Severus sighed contentedly, and Remus absent-mindedly played with his hair while Severus slipped back into sleep. He tried to stem the elation he felt at seeing how comfortable Severus was around him, but he failed. He liked this. He loved it. And it was all about to disappear, just as Severus reappeared for the rest of the world. Remus felt guilty because a part of him almost hoped Dumbledore wouldn't fix everything today, so he could have a few more mornings of this before he resigned himself to the lonely life his condition guaranteed. But Remus couldn't truly wish for that, even in the privacy of his thoughts, because more of this meant more suffering for Severus. Remus would do anything to make sure Severus never suffered again. Already tired from the thought of the day ahead, Remus closed his eyes and let himself fall back to sleep.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

“He’s not here?” Lily asked, and Severus thanked the gods that he wasn’t the one on the receiving end of her wrath. McGonagall could probably hold her own, however. Severus thought that might be a side effect of working at this school as long as she had.

“The headmaster is away on important business right now.”

“When will he be back?”

McGonagall studied them over her glasses. “He hasn’t said. If there is something you need before he returns, you’re more than welcome to take it up with me.”

Lily glanced at Remus for Severus’ thoughts.

“You can try to explain the situation to her,” Severus consented. “I’ll reiterate that I doubt any member of the Hogwarts staff, except maybe Madam Pomfrey, gives a flying fuck about me, but do whatever you want.”

Remus turned to McGonagall. “Professor, it’s about Severus.”

McGonagall frowned. “Mr. Snape? Are you worried about...?” She glanced at Lily.

“She knows about my condition,” Remus said. McGonagall looked aptly surprised, but Remus ignored the question in her eyes. “And that’s not what this is about. We just want to know what’s happened to him.”

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I’ve been assured that Dumbledore is handling things with the boy.” Severus sighed loudly, and he was pretty sure Remus was considering joining in.

Lily was seconds from tearing her hair out, or maybe lighting the professor on fire. “Everyone keeps telling us that, but *what does it mean?*”

Severus sighed again, even louder--this time for dramatic flare. “Can we go now? This is pointless.”

Remus nodded minutely in resignation before clasping his hands together in a gesture of professionalism. Severus snorted. He still couldn’t quite believe the werewolf’s maturity performance actually worked, but he knew it did. Severus had seen it in action on several occasions when Potter and Black got carted off to detention while Remus remained blameless. But then, Remus wasn’t from the dreaded snake house, so it was easier for him to get away with things. “Thank you, Professor,” Remus said. “We’ll ask the Headmaster for more details when he returns.”

McGonagall eyed them carefully. “If you’re concerned for the boy, I can write Professor Dumbledore about him.”

Lily looked like she wanted to scream, but Remus elbowed her before she could and said, “That would be wonderful, thank you,” before dragging Lily out the door.

They made it six paces down the hallway before Lily spoke. “I should go back and tell her what



he's done."

Severus didn't respond. He seemed to be the only one unsurprised by McGonagall's lack of concern. Every staff member in this castle was on Dumbledore's side when it came down to it, and Severus certainly wasn't enough to change that. But perhaps two Gryffindors could get the results Severus never had. It would be an interesting experiment when Dumbledore returned, but Severus wouldn't put his faith in it.

"He shouldn't get away with this," Lily muttered. "That heartless *fuck!*"

"Lily!" Remus admonished.

She looked him in the eyes, chin raised. "I won't apologize. He cursed Sev and then *left*. Who does that? It's despicable. More than that, it's dangerous! What if something happened to Sev and no one knew he was in trouble?"

As Severus invisibly nodded his head in agreement, he remembered the mysterious bandages. He had nearly forgotten about them now that his scratches were healed, but Lily's words brought his curiosity was back.

*Even if it seems like no one can see or hear you at all, help will find you.*

An idea sparked. "Remus, hex me."

"What?" Remus looked like he didn't know whether to be more concerned with Lily's philippic or Severus' masochism. "Why would I--"

"Oh, come on, no need to get squeamish now." Severus smirked, unable to stop himself. "You've done it before." He took satisfaction in the wounded look on Remus' face.

Remus glanced at Lily as if for help, but Lily was too busy cursing out Dumbledore to notice their interaction. Turning back to Severus, he asked, "Why are you asking me to do that?"

"It was a command, really," Severus drawled, already wondering if he could manage to hex himself. He'd never tried, but most spells could work on the caster with some slight adjustments to wand movement and intent. It would certainly take less effort than convincing Remus to forgo his newfound morals. Stupid, inconsistent Gryffindors. Remus could hex him for *fun* when his friends were around, but he suddenly obtained scruples the moment Severus actually *needed* him to hex him.

"Severus, I don't know what you're playing at," Remus said like the noble bastard he was, "but I'm not going to hex you."

"Fine, tell Lily to do it." Two experiments in one.

Remus opened and closed his mouth several times before turning to Lily. "Severus wants me to tell you to hex him."

"Dumbledore?" Lily asked, eyes bright.

"Er, no. Severus wants you to hex...Severus."

Lily considered it and shrugged. "Alright. Where is he?"

Remus gaped at her, and Severus hummed in delight. He loved Lily.

“You’re just going to do it?” Remus sputtered. “Because he asked you to?”

Lily smiled sweetly. “That’s what friends are for.” Severus really wanted to hug her.

Remus said something under his breath that sounded a lot like, “she would eat prongs alive,” but maybe Severus had misheard because that didn’t make any sense. Maybe he’d said she would eat prawns alive? That was almost as odd, but at least prawns could be alive and also eaten.

Taking pity on Remus after a few moments, Lily rolled her eyes. “Come on, Lupin. He knows how I feel about Dark Magic, even simple bits like hexes. He wouldn’t be asking without good reason. And if he was feeling suicidal, he would have tried to drown himself in the lake already, so it must be something else.”

Remus stared at her for a few more seconds before nodding meekly. Looking to Severus once more for confirmation, Remus came to stand behind Severus, hands on his shoulders.

“He’s here.” Now that Remus had reluctantly agreed, he seemed committed to whatever they were doing. “If the hex hits me instead, we’ll know whether magic goes through him or not.”

Severus was curious about that as well, so he didn’t try to move Remus out of the way.

Lily drew her wand, tapping it against her palm in thought. “I’m assuming you want something a little more incapacitating than the tickling hex.”

Severus nodded, and Remus relayed the message.

Lily hummed, and before he could offer a suggestion, Lily pointed her wand his way and cast a spell. For a few moments, nothing happened. He glanced at Remus to make sure he was unaffected as well. He was. Severus wondered if the curse had somehow swallowed up the spell.

Then it hit, and Severus crumpled to the ground. His legs were bent the wrong way from Lily’s knee reversal hex, but there was surprisingly little pain beyond the initial relocation. Ignoring the strange sensation, he wondered instead at the tardiness of the spell’s effect. It was similar to how the owl had eventually found him to deliver Lily’s letter but only after a few days of searching. Perhaps the curse fooled location magic and hexes temporarily, but it couldn’t fully block them. Whatever the case, there was complicated magic involved which didn’t bode well for their goal to undo it. Severus wondered yet again what he’d done to make such a powerful and ancient wizard decide to curse him--besides almost dying. More importantly, he wondered who put the old coot in charge of a *school*.

“Remus, is he alright?” Lily asked.

Sometime during Severus’ contemplation of the new changes to his anatomy, Remus had put his arm around Severus, likely to keep him upright. “Er, I think so. His knees are backward.”

Lily dropped into a crouch a few steps away, thankfully far enough that she wasn’t standing *in* Severus. “I’m going to kill Dumbledore when he gets back,” she said, and her voice was so matter-of-fact that Severus couldn’t help but snicker. “If Sev can still get hit with spells but no one can see him to get him medical help, then Dumbledore has willfully put a student’s life in danger.”

“Can you reverse the hex?” Remus asked.

Severus shook his head. “No, wait. I’m testing something. You two step around the corner for a minute.”

Remus looked like he wanted to protest again, but he knew what the outcome would be. He disconnected himself from Severus and pulled Lily out of the way, explaining as he did so. The moment they were out of sight, Severus heard a soft *pop*. He remembered hearing that same sound in Lily's room before and after the letter disappeared, and he assumed it must have happened while he slept that night as well. He eyed the responsible house-elf with narrowed eyes.

"Hello, sir! Deeny is here to help, sir."

Severus wondered what triggered the house-elf's arrival. Was he under constant surveillance and the house-elf appeared only when he was hurt? (Or when he was trying to send a letter apparently, Severus noted with annoyance) Perhaps there some sort of alarm built into Severus' curse that notified the house-elf whenever she was necessary. It would be nice to know what reasons were set to notify her if that was the case. 'Injury' made sense, but Severus couldn't fathom why 'mail delivery' was one of the specifications. Evidently, making sense was too much to ask of the headmaster. "Did Dumbledore send you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir! Dumbledore is always trusting Deeny with important things like keeping the students safe."

Thinking of the poorly wrapped bandages, Severus had to contain a scoff. "Safe, yes."

Deeny nodded enthusiastically before leaning in close, almost conspiratorially. "This might hurt for a moment, sir." Then she snapped her fingers and Severus' knees were righted once more.

"Thank you, Deeney."

The house-elf beamed at him. "You is most welcome, sir! Deeney is happy to help!" With a clumsy movement somewhere between a bow and a curtsy, Deeney disappeared with another *pop*.

Lily and Remus reemerged from around the corner.

"A house-elf?" Lily exclaimed. "That's Dumbledore's safe-guard? They aren't even medically trained!"

Severus picked himself up off the ground, shrugging even though she couldn't see it. He was growing bored of the Gryffindors' continued surprise at Dumbledore's mistakes. "At least we have an answer to some of our questions."

Apparently Remus wasn't feeling Severus' positivity because he didn't relay the message. Instead, he joined Lily in cursing Dumbledore, their insults growing louder and more creative as they bounced off of each other. Severus' lips twitched.

Later that evening, they were in their spot in the library. The three of them had been researching ever since that morning, with Remus periodically stepping out to grab food from the kitchens. He claimed he knew where they were, but Severus decided he had to be lying since he said getting there involved tickling fruit. Despite the long hours tucked inside dusty books, they still hadn't found anything. It was probably a waste of time since Dumbledore surely knew more advanced magic than any of them, but it felt better than doing nothing, and there was no telling when Dumbledore would undo the spell.

Lily had cooled off after the first hour, but she still looked livid from time to time, and Severus couldn't help but smile. He'd started to take their friendship for granted as a given, but not being able to communicate with her for several days reminded him how much he loved her, and how

much he needed her in his life. He wouldn't let himself forget again.

Severus checked the time and stood. "I've had enough of researching for the day. I'll meet you in your dorm tonight, if that's alright?"

Remus frowned, and Severus wondered if Remus had supposed the bed-sharing to be a one-time thing. "Of course. But where are you going?"

Severus ducked his head to hide his expression. Belatedly, he realized that made him look more suspicious, but there was nothing for it now. "There's just something I need to do."

"What's going on?" Lily asked.

"Severus is finished for the night."

Severus still wasn't used to the awkward pacing of conversation when Remus had to relay every comment or occurrence, but he was glad Remus could figure out which messages were just for him and which should be shared. Severus tried for a smile at Remus, but he knew it fell short. "See you later tonight."

Remus' skeptical expression didn't fade, but he said, "See you," and Severus took that as his cue to leave.

Regulus, Avery, Mulciber and several others were exiting Slytherin just as Severus arrived, and he quickly slipped in among their ranks. He had expected them to wait until it was after curfew, so he was glad he'd decided to leave the library a bit early. He supposed it made sense since the group was so large—it was less suspicious to be out and about earlier in the evening. If Filch or someone questioned them, they could claim they were going to study or something equally harmless. Then again, there was little chance of them not seeming suspicious when the air was so fraught with fear and tension.

When they stepped out of the castle, Severus wished he'd brought a cloak. The wind bit through his Muggle clothes like icy claws, and he wished he could huddle closer to his fellow Slytherins for warmth. Every few seconds, however, someone would walk through him, reminding him how immaterial he was.

As they entered The Forbidden Forest, Severus noticed it seemed dormant for the first time in his memory, like all of the spirits that gave it life had grown ill or fled. The soil was hard and frozen, and each footstep made cracking noises, the earth brittle beneath their feet. Besides the cracking earth and the hissing wind, there were no sounds--not even the scuttling of the usual nocturnal creatures. The dry chill of the air seemed designed to desiccate anything that passed through it, and Severus had the feeling if he spoke, his voice would be hoarse.

Finally, they reached a clearing filled with robed, masked figures. Mulciber led them into the mass of bodies and then stood silently, waiting for something to commence. Several Death Eaters shifted, and at first, Severus thought it was some sort of strange dance, but then he realized they were each sidling up next to a student. Once everyone was in place, a tall figure swept into view. He didn't wear a mask, but his hood hung low so Severus couldn't make out his features.

And then he drew his hood back. The Death Eaters removed their masks in turn, and Severus looked around to identify which familiar faces were among the ranks. Mulciber was accompanied by his father, who held his head just as proudly as his son. Bellatrix was smiling a vulturous smile at Rosier, but Rosier knew better than to meet her gaze, so he didn't have the opportunity to flinch. Lucius Malfoy stood next to Avery, and Severus wondered if he would be in Avery's place if he



were visible. The thought made him swallow, but he couldn't figure out what part of it upset him. He tore his eyes away, looking instead at Narcissa who placed a possessive hand on Regulus. He was her cousin, Severus remembered. There were others who Severus recognized from the halls of Hogwarts but couldn't name. Most were Slytherins, but he spotted a few Ravenclaws as well, and perhaps some from the other Houses, but he couldn't be sure. Glancing around, he noticed for the first time that at least one of the current Hogwarts students was a Ravenclaw--Crouch, Severus thought was his name.

"Greetings," the Dark Lord said. His voice had a subtle rasp to it that made Severus' stomach tight. "My loyal Death Eaters and all our young friends." He wore a smirk on his face, but instead of reading as conceited, it was designed to make them feel like they were in on a joke--like they were part of something bigger than they could possibly understand. "Tonight is a night for celebration."

Severus glanced around him again, gauging the reactions of the others. When he did, he realized there were people missing, people he knew had become Death Eaters. He wondered why only certain members had come tonight. He reasoned that their numbers were likely greater than what was needed for tonight, but something still felt...off.

"Soon we will be inviting new members into the fold, and this gathering will help us determine who those members will be. Think of it not as a competition but as an opportunity to share your talents, your desires, your visions for the future we're building together. And likewise, you can ask us anything. We are here for you to assess us as much as to assess you. We would not have asked you here today if we did not value you--if we did not see your true worth, your true potential. But...

"...I understand if you'd rather let the unworthy govern you. How could you not?" His expression appeared open, but there was a sinister glint in his eyes. "When this...improper order has made you weak? When the Muggles have convinced you we must cower in fear? When the Mudbloods have taken what is rightfully yours? I understand if you're not willing to take up the fight--if you're content to let them dishonor us, *sully us*, by walking amongst us as if they could possibly be our equals. But for those of you who reject this weakness, for those of you who want to claim what, by your birthright, you deserve...well, you will join us as we set the world on fire." The Dark Lord punctuated this statement with a nonverbal *incendio* that lit the trees around them to a violent blaze. Several students gasped. "And then, my chosen few..." His laugh was even more unsettling than his voice. "Then, we will reign."

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus and Lily tried to keep researching after Severus left, but it felt weird without him, even if, for Lily, nothing had really changed. Remus had wanted to follow after Severus, but he supposed that was a little neurotic--even if Severus had looked very suspicious--and he didn't want to ask James for the invisibility cloak because that would mean talking to James, who he was still kind of ignoring.

When Remus' foot-tapping and time-checking became too much, Lily slammed her book shut. "Okay, what are you not telling me?"

Remus sent her his most innocent look. "I have no idea to what you're referring."

"I might be more inclined to believe you if you hadn't placed the preposition in the middle of the sentence like you do when you're trying to fool a professor."



Remus' eyes widened. "Wow, alright. I'm impressed." Severus had picked up on his tricks as well, but he hadn't realized Lily was so perceptive.

Lily lifted a brow. "As if you've ever been good at keeping a secret. Potter, Black, Sev, and even *Pettigrew* figured out you're a werewolf."

"First, it is highly unfair to blame my secret-keeping abilities for my roommates finding out. They live with me, so it's kind of a dead give away when I'm not in my bed every night on the full moon. And second..." Remus sighed. "Severus looked really suspicious when he left. I'm worried about what he's up to."

Lily frowned. "He didn't say where he was going? Or when he'd be back?"

"No," Remus said, deciding it was better not to tell Lily about their sleeping arrangement. "Any ideas?"

Lily shook her head. "If he was visible, I'd say he's following Mulciber around, but since no one can see him, I'm not really sure what trouble he could get up to."

Remus' brows furrowed. "Mulciber?"

Lily wrinkled her nose. "One of his Death Eater wannabe friends. He's the one who tried to use the Imperius curse Mary the other day?" Remus nodded. He had known who Mulciber was--he'd even mentioned it to Severus the other day. He just didn't know why she said 'following Mulciber around' like Severus was a starstruck fan instead of a friend. "Well, Severus thinks he hung the moon, and it's really annoying."

Remus sensed something odd in her tone, but he couldn't place it. Remus tucked it away for later. "And Severus...is he..." He was afraid to finish the question.

Lily had no such qualms. "Planning to join the Death Eaters?" she guessed. At Remus' nod, Lily sighed. "I don't know, Remus. I'm scared. I thought he knew better than that." Lily let out a sound almost like a laugh, but the grimace on her face conveyed hurt. "I thought he cared about *me* more than that--enough not to join them. But he's been different lately, and I'm worried he's made up his mind. Although I guess I've been different lately too. Sometimes I feel like we're growing apart."

Remus could hear the ache in her voice, and he recognized what it meant. It would be awkward if he was wrong, but he couldn't resist asking. "Um, not to pry, but have you and Severus ever dated?" Scratch that, it was awkward whether he was wrong or not. He was certain there was a way to phrase the question that didn't make him sound like an idiot, but it was too late to edit now.

Lily groaned and rolled her eyes. "No, he's not interested at all. I've been half in love with him for as long as I can remember, and he's never expressed even the slightest bit of interest. You would not believe how much flirting I've done. Sometimes I think it's all going right over his head."

Remus laughed, feeling a pressure on his chest lift. "That sounds like Severus."

Lily joined in his laughter, but the sound faded quickly. "I don't even care if he feels the same way anymore. Being friends is enough for me. I just don't want to lose him, or have to cut him out of my life, and I'm scared because I can already see him pulling away."

Remus reached for her hand and squeezed it because there was nothing he could say to that. How could he comfort her when they both knew his reassurances were unfounded? Lily knew Severus better than he did. "I think we've researched enough," he said instead. "Wanna call it a night?"

She gave him a grateful smile. "Yeah."

As they walked back to Gryffindor, Remus found himself shifting between fear of what side Severus would choose in the upcoming war and selfish pleasure at the idea that maybe Severus didn't love Lily like that after all. But then, Remus would almost be okay with him loving Lily if it meant he didn't join the Death Eaters.

No, he *would* be okay with it. Eventually. Even if it hurt for a very long time. Because Severus would be happy, safe, and loved in a way Remus knew Lily would ensure. Remus didn't belong in that picture. A part of him wondered if Severus might even be safer with the Death Eaters than with someone like Remus.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Unable to watch or listen any more, Severus left the 'celebration' before it was officially over. He felt insubstantial again, but this time because his future was unclear. If he'd attended as a guest instead of a lurker, he likely would have gotten swept up in it all. The Dark Lord practically emanated power, and if Lucius Malfoy had stood next to Severus and told him he would achieve great things, Severus would have believed him. He would have sold his soul in an instant for even a chance at that kind of power, respect, praise.

But watching from the outside? It was so clearly an act. Pairing each student with a wealthy, pureblood Death Eater made them feel special, important. The Death Eaters who were half-bloods or Muggleborns or lower-class didn't attend. They didn't sell the story the way the Malfoys and the Lestranges did, but they did give Severus a hint of what waited for him if he joined the Dark Lord: promises of fortune and power while being relegated to the outskirts to do the Dark Lord's dirty work. Severus didn't want that. He wouldn't live like that.

But if he didn't join the Death Eaters, what was left for him?

That was the thought that kept ringing in his head the entire walk back to the castle. His only chance to make something of himself had been ripped away, just like his image, his voice, his body. His future was just another thing that didn't exist anymore.

As he wandered aimlessly through the school, he tried to remember what other options he had. Surely he'd had career plans, dreams, goals, before the Dark Lord came along and reshaped them? The fact that he couldn't remember them now only increased his fear that he was fading away into nothingness.

He didn't know how long he walked or in which directions, but before he knew it, he was climbing into Remus' bed. Seeking touch, seeking warmth, seeking proof he existed, as if it would keep his future from disappearing too. Remus was asleep, but at Severus' touch, he roused and murmured, "Severus, you're so cold. Where have you been?"

Severus attached himself to Remus in every way he could, trying to maximize contact. *I'm real, I'm real, Remus is real, I can feel him, he can see me, he can feel me.* "Can we not talk about that right now?" Severus asked, and for once, he was glad for the shake in his voice because he knew it would win Remus over.

"Of course," Remus said, more awake now. "Whatever you need."

Severus felt guilt press at his diaphragm for his subtle manipulation, but he needed this too much to stop. He pressed his face into the crook of Remus' neck as Remus wrapped his arms around him, and their legs tangled together under the covers.

"Should I get you another pair of pajamas?" Remus asked, and Severus shook his head. He didn't want Remus to get up and leave him alone in the dark. However, his jeans *were* a problem, so he unbuttoned them and kicked them off, letting them crumple at the base of the bed. Remus stared at him, agape, but Severus didn't want judgment right now, he just wanted contact, so he tucked himself up against Remus again. Severus pressed his cheek against Remus' like he'd done the night before, and Remus let him.

*I'm real, I'm real, Remus is real.*

Dizzy and filled with desire for more than just affirmations of his existence, Severus turned to kiss Remus' cheek, then several places on his jaw. Remus made a noise in the back of his throat, and instead of pushing Severus away, his arms tightened, holding him closer.

*I can feel him, he can see me, he can feel me.*

Severus moved against Remus in an effort to touch every part of him. When their hips met, Severus gasped. Remus' cock was half-hard against his own, and Severus needed more of that pressure. He didn't want to think about the implications of their matching arousal or how this would affect their relationship afterward. He didn't want to think at all. He rolled his hips experimentally, and Remus bucked in response, letting out a soft cry. And then they were rocking against each other, and Severus was crying out too. Unsure if Remus had cast a silencing spell tonight, Severus pressed his face into Remus' shoulder as he reached his climax. Remus had no such concerns, and he came with Severus' name on his lips.

As they tried to catch their breath, Severus pulled back just enough to look Remus in the eyes. Remus was already looking at him, and Severus' heart skipped a beat at the awe in his gaze. With his thoughts still being forcefully kept quiet, Severus didn't have to wonder why he wanted to kiss Remus. He leaned in and captured his lips, and after a few seconds, Remus started kissing him back. It was slow and uncoordinated and messy and better than Severus had imagined.

When they finally broke apart for air, Severus couldn't keep the smile from his face. Remus wore a matching one, and for a moment, the world was limited to that perfect expression, that perfect kiss, that perfect moment.

But then Remus extracted himself from their embrace to get his wand and clean them up, and Severus felt the events of the night come rushing back. There was no way he'd be able to sleep with everything rushing through his head, even with the physical exhaustion he felt.

When Remus finished his cleaning spells and placed his wand on his bedside table, Severus pulled him close again. He let his head fall back on Remus' chest so Remus wouldn't see his expression. "Goodnight, Remus," he whispered.

Remus' arm came up to rest on his waist. "Goodnight, Severus."

A few hours of staring at the bed curtains proved Severus was right about not being able to sleep. His thoughts were racing, and he had tossed and turned so much he was surprised he hadn't woken Remus. At around three in the morning, he needed to pee. He plucked his jeans from the base of the bed and extracted his wand from them to cast a *lumos* so he didn't trip on the way to the bathroom.

When he returned, he spotted a stack of books on Remus' bedside table. Hoping some of them were for their research so he could work on that instead of staring at the ceiling, Severus scanned the titles. They didn't look like they would offer a solution to his predicament, but they piqued his interest all the same. Most of the authors didn't even sound like wizards, so Remus likely brought them from home. The only book that looked magical was titled: *Beyond Blood Purity: A Class-Centered Analysis of Power in British Wizarding Society*. Curious, Severus took it and slipped back into bed. Tucking his head, book, and wand under the covers so he could read without the light disturbing Remus, Severus turned to the front page.

## Chapter 8

By the time Remus started to stir that morning, Severus had read three-quarters of the book. He was enthralled. The author was a woman named Amelda Hopkins, and she presented a view of wizarding politics he'd never seen before. She explained how a large majority of purebloods, rather than being wealthy like the Malfoys, the Blacks, and the Potters, were working-class. To maintain the myth of pureblood supremacy, the Dark Lord and others like him scapegoated Muggleborns and sometimes half-bloods as the reason why purebloods weren't experiencing the power and prestige they were told was their birthright. This pitted lower class purebloods against Muggleborns, obscuring who really held the power and turning what was actually a class divide into a war about blood purity.

It fit with what Severus had seen at the Death Eater gathering the night before, and the more Severus thought about it, the truer it seemed. Rosier was a pureblood, but he shopped at the same second-hand robe shop as Severus. Avery was a pureblood, but he lived in the wizard-equivalent of Spinner's End. Even Mulciber wasn't very well-off, although he had more money than the rest of them. His father worked for the Ministry, but his salary certainly didn't fill a vault like the Malfoys'. Joining the Death Eaters seemed like it would bring them power or wealth, but really, it would just make them lackeys for the true power-holders like Lucius, Narcissa, and Bellatrix.

The part that really made Severus think was the part about solidarity--the idea that if others realized what was now becoming clear to Severus, then they could start the revolution Severus had hoped he would find with the Dark Lord. The kind of revolution where blood status no longer mattered and power was no longer held in the hands of only a few. The kind of revolution that meant there was a place for people like Severus, like Lily, like Remus. That would really set the world on fire.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus awoke to find Severus reading intently, and Remus smiled at the sight. The memory of last night's events warmed him to his toes. Even though he knew Severus had only done those things to ground himself, Remus was still half-asleep enough to let himself live in his fantasy--a fantasy where Severus wanted him too.

"Morning," he greeted.

Severus closed his book and turned to look at him. There was a spark in his eyes that hadn't been there the day before. "Have you read this?"

Remus blinked a few times to adjust his eyes to the light. "Hopkins? Just the first couple of



chapters. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to get my hands on a copy. I've read several leftist Muggle writers, but the Ministry has banned Hopkins' books throughout Britain."

"I can see why," Severus said, and at first, Remus worried he was taking the side of the Ministry. "It changes everything."

A grin slowly made its way across Remus' face, hope flickering to life in his chest. "I'm really glad you like it."

"I wonder if there's some way I could get Avery to read it," Severus thought aloud. He was deep in thought for a few moments, and when his eyes focused on Remus' again, he set the book down gently and cuddled into Remus' side. Remus felt content, and he tried to lock that feeling into his memory forever to look back on when he couldn't have this anymore. The feeling of warmth, love, and Severus.

Remus hated to be the one to burst the idyllic mood, but he needed to tell Severus what he'd decided before he fell asleep. "Severus, can we talk about what happened last night?"

Severus tensed and didn't respond for a moment. "What do you need to say?"

Remus took a deep breath. "I don't think it should happen again while you're under the effects of this curse."

Before Remus could say anything else, Severus withdrew from his arms. "Right. Okay." His eyes were hidden from view, so Remus couldn't tell what he was feeling. Even so, he could feel the coldness--the way Severus closed off the connection between them like he had flipped a switch.

"Severus--"

"You don't have to explain, Lupin. I'm sorry I made you do something you didn't want to."

"You didn't--"

Severus shoved open the curtains. "I'll sleep in my own bed tonight." The curtains shut once more, and he was gone.

Remus' head fell back against the pillow, and he cursed himself for being so stupid. Why did his attempts to do what was right always end up hurting the people he loved? He wondered what Lily would say to his latest mistake. She had been quick to point out why leaving Hogwarts was a bad idea, even as Remus was growing more and more certain it was the right thing to do. Perhaps he should have asked her opinion before talking to Severus. But then, it wasn't his place to tell Lily what he and Severus had done last night, and Remus couldn't exactly talk to the Marauders--who he was still avoiding--about Severus. So he had made a decision on his own, and it was obviously the wrong one. Too bad it only became obvious moments too late.

Rousing himself from his pool of self-pity, Remus noticed that Severus had left his book behind. He picked it up, wondering whether he should bring it to Severus. Or perhaps...

Remus opened his curtains. He might have messed things up with Severus, but he could still do his best to help him until the spell broke. And if that meant getting this book to Avery, then he would do it--regardless of the fact that he had never spoken to Avery before and he wasn't entirely sure he remembered which one was Avery. Even if he could identify the Slytherin, there was no explanation he could give that would make sense of the gift. Maybe he could come up with some sort of lie on the way to the dungeons...

But if he told a lie, it was less likely that Avery would read the book. No, he had to know it was from Severus if this was going to work. Maybe it would be best to just tell the truth. After all, it could be good for Severus to have a friend in his own house who knew about his situation--especially if Severus didn't want to speak to Remus ever again. With that in mind, Remus set about getting ready for the day. Before Remus could climb out of bed, however, he noticed James studying him.

Remus rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and his vision cleared just as James was tucking something under his pillow. It made a crinkling noise, but Remus couldn't see what it was. "Good morning," he said carefully.

"Hey, Moony," James greeted. His voice was casual, but he was still looking at Remus funny. "How are you feeling?"

"...fine." Remus wasn't sure what was happening. Didn't James know Remus was avoiding him? And why was he looking at him like he had grown horns? Remus' heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. Had he forgotten to cast a silencing spell last night? But no, he specifically remembered casting one before going to sleep, so he could speak with Severus whenever he arrived. Had he noticed Severus leaving? The bed curtains would have opened and then the door to their room, so even if Severus was invisible, James might be suspicious. Before Remus let himself truly start panicking, he took a deep breath and added, "Why do you ask?"

James shrugged, but there was tension in his shoulders and calculation in his eyes. "I just wanted to check in. You haven't been talking to any of us lately, and I'm worried about you. Last time we talked..."

Oh. Right. The last time they had talked, Remus had looked like he was insane, and then he had run off without doing anything to alleviate James' fears. How was he supposed to explain *that* without revealing Severus' secret?

"I'm fine, James. Really," he tried. "I was exhausted and in a lot of pain from the full moon, and I wasn't thinking straight." Feeling guilty for lying but knowing it was the only way to get James to stop pressing him about it, Remus kept going. "I couldn't stop imagining how terrified he must have been." There was no need to specify who 'he' was. "The horror and disgust he must have felt when he saw me there, looking like..." *Like a monster*, he was going to say, but he couldn't claim he just 'looked like' a monster. "I still see his face sometimes when I close my eyes--"

It was easy to sell the story because that part was true. Remus was haunted by that night. He couldn't tell if the pictures in his head were fragments of memories or his own imagination, but it felt natural when his voice broke. In case Remus had been wrong about the silencing charm last night, he added, "I've been having nightmares, too. And sometimes when I'm awake, my mind drifts, and I feel like I'm back in the tunnel, back in a nightmare or a memory or..." Remus swallowed. "That's what happened in Potions. I'm sorry I ran off without explaining, I just--"

"Moony, it's alright," James said, and his eyes were softer. His attempt at comfort was unsuccessful because Remus was lying lying lying, but Remus forced himself to look relieved. "Have you visited Madam Pomfrey? She could probably give you something to help."

"Not yet," Remus said. He needed to lighten the mood--to get James to stop looking at him like he was someone to be pitied. "If I go back, she might strap me back to a hospital bed and never let me leave. I had to sneak out when her back was turned in order to return to classes when I did."

James grinned. "I bet she'd keep you for several hours just to listen to the lecture she's no doubt been crafting in her head."

Remus grimaced, and James laughed. Feeling like he had accomplished his mission--his mission being to assuage James' concerns and end on a good note so he could go back to ignoring him--Remus started gathering his clothes to shower and get dressed. He assumed James would do the same, or at least realize their chat was over, but he didn't.

"I saw you in the library yesterday."

Remus wondered if he should take his time picking out his clothes so he wouldn't have to look at James or if he should hurry so he could excuse himself from the conversation as quickly as possible. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I didn't realize you were on such good terms with Evans."

Remus heard the barely concealed jealousy in his voice and wanted to laugh at how ridiculous it was given everything that had happened last night. However, the underlying accusation was just as obvious, and Remus didn't want to make things worse. "She offered to talk with me since she noticed I've been avoiding you three." He said the last part pointedly, hoping James would get the hint. He didn't, of course.

"Oh. Right, right." James paused, and Remus hurriedly piled his things into his arms so he could make a run for it. He wanted to find Avery as soon as possible so he could start mending things with Severus. When James spoke again, Remus's arms were full and he was out of tasks to occupy himself with so he had no choice but to look at him. "It's good that you have someone to talk to." Remus hummed an affirmative and started toward the door, but James evidently wasn't finished. "Although...wouldn't it be more helpful to talk to people who know what happened?"

Remus tilted his head to the side. "People like you and Peter?"

"Yeah, why not?" There was a challenge in his voice, and Remus almost gave in and told him.

*I think we're bad for each other, Remus wanted to say. I think being a Marauder is less about pranks and more about hurting people, and I don't want to do that anymore. I never wanted to be a monster.*

Instead, he rolled his eyes and said, "You're just jealous that I've been hanging out with Lily while she still won't give you the time of day."

James looked at him crossly. "Yeah, a bit. You know she's off-limits. Just because you're avoiding the Marauders doesn't mean you can break the Marauder's code."

"James, relax. I'm not trying to steal her." *And anyway, she's interested in someone else, so I couldn't steal her from you regardless.* "We're friends. And she *does* know what happened that night."

James was starting to relax when Remus' last sentence sunk in. "She *what*?"

"I told her about my condition," Remus said easily, as if he outed himself as a werewolf all the time. "Se--" Remus caught himself, "Snape is her best friend. I thought she deserved to know what happened."

James got that calculating look in his eye again, and Remus wondered what he had said to trigger it. "And you trust her to keep your secret?"

Remus grinned. Lily had been quite adamant that it remain a secret. "Prongs, have a little faith in your future wife."

James brightened at that, as Remus knew he would. Had Remus mentioned lately that Remus was a terrible, manipulative, lying friend? Because he was. "Has she said anything about me?"

"She was surprised that you rescued Severus, even though you hate him," Remus said honestly. He wasn't sure if Lily was impressed or just disbelieving, but she was definitely surprised, and Remus knew James would take that as positive. He did. Remus was forced to listen to five minutes of his lovesick babbling before he managed to escape to the bathroom. He hoped Lily would forgive him for this. James' revitalized hope in their future would no doubt mean he'd be pestering her even more than usual.

*A terrible, terrible friend*, he repeated to himself, this time adding both Lily and Severus to the list of people he had mistreated today.

Once he had showered and dressed, Remus grabbed Hopkins' book and made his way toward Slytherin. He could at least do his best to fix one of his friendships--and maybe give Lily a heads up about James.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

After leaving Remus' room, Severus walked and walked until he found an alcove to hide away in. He knew no one could see him, but it still felt wrong to cry out in the open. Why was he even crying? He had known Remus only let him do those things because he was trying to keep Severus from having a panic attack. He knew that--had manipulated the situation because of that even. So why did all of that seem less true than the look in Remus' eyes right before they kissed? Why did it feel like such a blow to have the truth confirmed? And why did he feel worse now than he did when he first realized he was invisible?

Severus had been so close to a breakthrough. He'd discovered a way to keep everyone he cared about in his life--a future that didn't involve joining the Death Eaters--and already, his perfect plan was slipping away from him. He didn't even know why he was surprised. When had life ever worked in his favor?

A popping sound only corroborated his misfortune.

"Deeny is here to help, sir!"

He hid his face, wanting to scream. Screaming without anyone being able to hear was one of the few perks of this disaster, and now, he couldn't even do that. "I don't need help," he gritted out. "Go away." His voice nasally and thick with tears, and he hated himself for allowing his breakdown to be so obvious.

"But Deeny is meant to help when Mister Snape is crying. Dumbledore would be furious with Deeny if she let sir cry without coming to help!"

"Would he, now?" Severus couldn't help the bitter twist of his lips.

"Oh, yes! Deeny will help now so there is no need for tears."

He wanted to be angry with her, but it was Dumbledore who deserved his blame, not the house-elf. "I'm not hurt, Deeny," he told her. "Thank you for offering your services, but they really aren't necessary."



Deeny pouted, looking confused. "But if sir isn't hurt, why is he crying?"

That was a wonderful question. Severus pressed a hand against his chest, trying to force his heart to get the message.

"Oh! Deeny sees, sir. Mister Snape is suffering from a broken heart."

Severus looked up sharply, nauseated by the knowing, sympathetic look on her face. "I'm not--"

"Don't worry, Deeny knows just the thing for that!" She hopped forward and wrapped her tiny arms around him, only managing to cover his knees. "There, there. Deeny is here."

Severus wanted to glare at her, but instead, he found himself laughing, and then sobbing, and laughing some more. Deeny wasn't really the one he wanted to glare at anyway. Maybe Remus. Definitely Dumbledore. Perhaps even Potter or Black, because Severus always felt better after a nice, venomous glare at one of them. "Thank you, Deeny," Severus said, too weak to push her away.

Severus didn't know how long they sat there, Deeny clutching at his knees and Severus burying his face in the crook of his arm, but eventually, his tears dried, and Deeny left with another *pop*. Severus didn't get up. He didn't feel better, just empty. And it wasn't like anyone would miss him if he never left this alcove. Or if they did miss him, they'd miss him even if he left the alcove since *he wasn't fucking real*.

Which is why he was so surprised when he heard the words, "Well hello, Snivellus."

Severus looked up quickly. Potter was standing in front of him, but before Severus could panic that he had somehow become visible just in time for Potter to see him cry, he noticed Potter's eyes were focused somewhere above his head.

"I thought you'd been expelled for poking your head around where it didn't belong. I was even worried Remus was going crazy for a bit when he told me he'd been spending time with you."

Severus spotted a bit of parchment in Potter's hands, and he stood to get a better look at it while Potter talked to the wall. It looked like a map of Hogwarts with little feet beside the names of everyone in the castle. Including Severus.

"But then I noticed the way things moved without anyone touching them--more so than usual at Hogwarts, especially around Remus. And then Sirius was mad at me for something I didn't do, and Remus was mad at all of us, and I realized someone was meddling once again." Potter stepped closer--*through* Severus--and snatched at the air. "The only question is: how are you doing it? It's not an invisibility cloak, but it's something, and I'm going to find out."

Potter thought this was *intentional*? Severus wanted to bang his head against the wall. Why on earth would he subject himself to this torture? What did Potter think he could gain by not being real? He supposed it was nice to know Potter thought so highly of his magical talent, but this conversation did nothing to raise Severus' opinion of Potter.

Potter rechecked his map and spun around to grab at the air that made up Severus. He scowled when his hand came away empty. "You've been pushing Remus away from us, and I don't like it. I know you were in our room this morning, and I'll figure out what it is you're doing to him. He's not going to join your little club, if that's what this is about, so you can leave him alone. Otherwise, you'll regret it whenever you decide to show your face in this school again." After checking his map one last time, Potter strutted off down the hall.



Severus didn't know what to think of that bizarre display, but he almost laughed at the thought that James Potter could probably convince Dumbledore to return to Hogwarts and lift the spell just so he could hex Severus to get his revenge. The headmaster would do anything for his prized Gryffindor.

Severus decided things were too weird in this hallway, so it was time to head back to Slytherin. He missed his room anyway. It would be nice to sleep in his own bed for a change, he lied to himself.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus had Regulus' voice in his head as he waited outside the entrance to Slytherin, but this time, he'd remembered to bring James' invisibility cloak. He hadn't asked permission, but he was hoping to put it back before James missed it.

Remus watched dozens of Slytherins walk in and out of the portrait, including Severus. It had taken everything in Remus not to call out to him and try to explain, but he knew he should give Severus his space. Their conversation could wait--Remus had a mission to complete first.

When another half hour passed, Remus wondered if it might be worth it to make an exception to his self-appointed exile from the Marauders and go ask for the Marauder's Map. He hadn't seen the person he was looking for yet, and Remus hoped he remembered what he looked like. If he had the Map...but the thought of speaking to James again today after their conversation earlier made Remus decide to wait a little longer. The Map could be his last resort.

When the right Slytherin finally stepped into the corridor, Remus sighed in relief and followed him for a bit to get out of Slytherin territory before removing the cloak.

"Avery?" he asked.

The Slytherin turned to look at him. He frowned, but his expression lacked the coldness the other Slytherins might have given Remus. "What do you want?"

Remus held out Hopkins' book. "Severus wants you to have this."

Avery's eyes widened, but he didn't take the book. "You've talked to him?"

Remus couldn't decide how much to say. "Yes."

Avery glanced around the hall to make sure no one was looking and then stepped closer. "This is going to sound weird, but is he *here*?"

It was Remus' turn to be surprised. "Um, how do you--"

Avery exhaled in relief. "I thought I was going crazy. I see his bed curtains move sometimes, and food disappears from the Slytherin table when no one else is looking."

Remus' lips twitched. He was glad to see Severus had someone to look out for him in Slytherin. "He just went into Slytherin a few minutes ago. He'd probably appreciate it if you spoke to him, just to let him know he's not alone."

Avery eyed him carefully and nodded. "Alright. Thanks...Lupin, is it?"

Remus nodded, and Avery took the book this time. Remus hoped Severus would see it and realize Remus didn't hate him--didn't even want to stop seeing him. All Remus had wanted was to wait until this spell business was all sorted before they did anything not-platonic again. He couldn't take not knowing if Severus really wanted him or if Remus was just taking advantage. But having Severus think Remus hated him was worse than any of that. Sighing, Remus started the long walk back to Gryffindor. At least maybe Severus wouldn't be alone now that Avery knew he was there.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

When Severus' bed curtains flew open, he screamed. That was uncalled for, he would admit, but it was a bit unnerving for everyone around him to suddenly know where he was. First Deeny, then Potter, and now...

"Hey," Avery said, looking like he felt incredibly awkward about it. "I hope you're in there, and I'm not just talking to myself, but I wanted to let you know that I'm...here, or something. That Lupin guy gave me this book and said it was from you, so I know now that I'm not going crazy, and that you're really here, somehow."

Severus stared at him, trying to process everything Avery was telling him. Avery had noticed--*really noticed*--his absence, or his presence, or both, and Remus had given Avery the book he'd tried so hard to find, just because Severus had off-handedly mentioned it. When he recovered from his shock, Severus grabbed his pillow and tossed it in the air.

Avery grinned at the pillow, nodded, and held up the book. "Thanks for this. I've gotta get to lunch now, but if you wanna take some food from my plate or whatever, feel free."

Severus felt a surge of happiness at the realization that he had another true friend. It was nice to know that Remus hadn't completely abandoned him either. Severus changed into a new outfit and followed Avery to the Great Hall. Avery glanced around him every now and then as if Severus might suddenly appear, which was amusing enough to erase the last dregs of Severus' bad mood. He took out his wand and started charming the stones beneath his feet to turn green. Avery saw them and smiled again, and for some reason, that made Severus ridiculously happy. It was nice to have friends.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Research continued as usual for the next week, but it wasn't the same now that things were strained between Remus and Severus. Every time Lily stepped out of earshot, Remus would try to talk to Severus, and each time, Severus would change the subject or say he was tired and ready to head back to Slytherin. After the first few attempts, Remus sighed in resignation and stopped trying.

This was what he wanted, after all, right? For Severus to keep his distance until after the spell ended? Of course, it would be better if Severus *knew* that's what Remus wanted, instead of thinking Remus hated or was repulsed by him. And it would be better if he would let Remus explain that touching was okay, but kissing and...certain other activities...were strictly not. But then, if touching was allowed, it was only a matter of time before the others happened again too. Remus hadn't even intended for those things to happen the first time, so it wasn't like he was

confident in his ability to keep them from happening in the future.

So the tension between them and the pain in Remus' chest was good actually. Or something. But it sucked, and he could tell Lily knew something was up, even if she didn't say anything about it directly. Every now and then, Severus would start to hyperventilate or shake, and Remus would reach out a hand, but the moment Severus recovered, he would let go as if Remus had burned him.

Lily checked in day after day to see if Dumbledore had returned, and each time she came back with an angry look on her face. Remus was starting to believe Dumbledore was staying away on purpose, and he hated the Headmaster for it, in spite of all the good things he'd done for Remus in the past.

Remus could see the bags under Severus' eyes growing darker every day, and he felt guilty for being the reason. If he'd just kept his mouth shut and let Severus take whatever he wanted from him, Severus would be sleeping soundly each night, and Remus would get to hold him in his arms and see him smile like he hadn't figured out if he was making the expression properly but didn't care. Remus had given all of that up, and it was getting harder to remember why. Probably because Remus tended to fuck up everything good in his life. Either way, he hoped they found a counter-curse soon, or Dumbledore chose to get back here and do his job, because Remus didn't know if he could handle much more of this.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Severus entered his dormitory after another research session with Lily and Remus, and all he wanted was to go to sleep. It was harder since he'd stopped spending the night in Remus' bed, but he usually could manage at least a couple of hours. His roommates were in the room already, changing out of their school clothes, and Severus decided to wait a few minutes before getting ready for bed himself. He didn't know what harm it could do for the other Slytherins to realize something was up, but it seemed prudent to be cautious about who got to see floating objects.

It took Severus longer than it should have to realize there was something off about his roommates. The first tip-off was that they were entirely silent. Usually, there was at least some amount of teasing or meaningless prattle, generally with ulterior motives, but tonight, no one said anything. Severus glanced about the room only to find that they were changing out of their school clothes but into nice robes and winter cloaks. Which could only mean--

Severus opened his bed curtains to signal Avery. Avery looked up, gesturing meaningfully toward Severus' bedside table with his eyes and exiting the room.

Severus scoured the surface and didn't see anything but his usual stack of books. Upon a closer look, Severus realized there was an extra book in his pile, two down from the top. It was unfamiliar, and Severus wondered if it was some sort of clue. Mulciber and Rosier were still getting ready, so Severus pulled it out as carefully and soundlessly as possible. When he opened it to the title page, he saw it was Hopkins' book, wrapped in a different book jacket. There was a ripped piece of parchment in the front, and Severus read it as swiftly as he could. *Fuck.*

Remembering how cold he was during his last trip to the woods, he rummaged through his trunk for his mother's old cloak and darted out of the room. He needed to find Remus, and quickly.

## Chapter 9

The door to their dormitory swung open with a bang, and when Remus looked up, Severus was standing there. He had his winter cloak on over his T-shirt and jeans, and his eyes were wide but his lips were pressed into a determined line, making Remus almost afraid to approach him. Sirius and Peter were looking at the doorway in confusion while James walked over and stuck his head through Severus to find the culprit.

Remus was trying to figure out how to ask what Severus was doing without alerting the Marauders of his presence when James stiffened.

Severus stepped through James and made his way further into the room. "Potter figured out I'm here at Hogwarts using that stalker map of his, and we don't have time to be secretive, so we'd better just talk."

Remus' eyes flicked over to James, surprised that he had figured it out and not told anyone. From the curl of Severus' lip, whatever interaction they had had wasn't pleasant. "It's Severus," Remus told James. "Explain to Sirius and Pete?" When James nodded after only a slight narrowing of his eyes, Remus turned back to Severus. "What's going on?"

"The Dark Lord has been recruiting Hogwarts students to join the Death Eaters, and he's Marking some of them tonight."

Remus hated hearing Severus call him 'the Dark Lord,' but he stemmed his revulsion so he could process the rest of the sentence. "Shit. Who?"

Severus started pacing. "I don't know. Most of the Slytherins in my year have been going to the meetings--Mulciber recruited them--as well as some of the other years, but I'm not sure how many are taking the Mark tonight. There are some Ravenclaws too, which means other Houses might be involved." Severus eyed Sirius, and for the first time, it wasn't with hatred. "Regulus has been going. I can't imagine the Dark Lord would Mark someone so young, but I didn't think he'd be Marking people our age either, and apparently I was wrong about that."

Remus nodded somewhat numbly, trying to block out the sounds of Sirius and Peter who were still grappling with disbelief about Severus. "Okay, so what do we do about it?"

Severus straightened his cloak. "I'm going after them."

Remus stared at him, incredulous. "Not alone you're not."

Severus rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Obviously, or I wouldn't be here. I'm going to crash the event, but they won't be able to see or hear me, so if you're willing, I'll need you to speak. You can project your voice throughout the forest so you won't even need to be in the clearing, and meanwhile I'll take out the Death Eaters."

Remus shook his head. "They won't listen to a Gryffindor."

"What other choice do we have?"

Remus knew the question was meant to be rhetorical, but he thought of an answer anyway. "What about Avery?"

Severus considered it and nodded. "That might work, but we'll need a way for you to get close enough to him to tell him."

"Prongs, Padfoot, Wormtail!" The Marauders turned to look at him, Sirius with the most shock on his face since Remus hadn't formally addressed him since the full moon. "We're going to crash a Death Eater gathering."

Sirius flashed a dark grin. "Excellent."

James looked less onboard. "This was Snivellus' idea?"

"Don't call him that," Remus warned.

"I'm just worried this is a trap, that's all. He's basically one of them, you know."

Remus growled. They didn't have time for this. "He wouldn't have come to us for help if that was true."

"Just you," Severus pointed out. "I want it on record that I would like nothing to do with your pets."

Remus' lips twitched at how accurate Severus unknowingly was.

"He wouldn't have come to us unless it's a *trap*," James said, slowly like he was talking to a child. "I saw him in our room the other night, on the Marauder's Map. He was probably casting the Imperius curse on you like Mulciber did on MacDonald."

Severus groaned. "I swear if one more person brings that up--"

"I'm not cursed!" Remus snapped, getting pissed now. "Severus is my friend, and *we do not have time for this*. It *is* Severus' idea, and if you have a problem with that, we'll do this on our own." The thought of the two of them going up against the person some called the darkest wizard of all time made Remus' throat dry. But Severus was invisible which was like having a secret weapon, and James would probably still let Remus take his cloak. They could manage it, right? He swallowed, unconvinced by his own rationalizing. "But I trust him, so if you trust me, you'll help. Alright?"

James looked unsure how to respond to such forcefulness from Remus, but trusting his friends was something he prided himself on, so Remus knew he'd won. "Alright. I don't like it, but I'm in."

The other two quickly followed James' lead. Remus tried not to look as relieved as he felt. He filled them in on the situation, relaying Severus' thoughts as he voiced them, and when he finished, Sirius no longer looked excited. The mention of Regulus made him somehow both tense and weak. Remus wanted to offer comfort, but they weren't friends at the moment, and there wasn't time.

"If these idiots are going to help," Severus said with palpable annoyance in his voice, "we should invite Lily too."



Remus agreed. "Peter, go get Lily, will you?"

"Oi!" James called. "Why not me?"

Sirius gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Because, mate, we actually want her to say yes."

Severus snorted while James spluttered, and Remus found himself smiling in spite of everything. The smile Sirius gave him in response made Remus feel like maybe he could forgive him someday.

"So," Remus said, "Prongs, Padfoot, you can't be seen. Our plan is reliant on any half-bloods, Muggleborns, and lower-class purebloods coming to realize that You Know Who doesn't have their best interests in mind. You're known to be wealthy pureblood Gryffindors, and if this looks like that's who's attacking, the students will see us as the enemy. We want this to seem like a coup from within. Stay behind the trees, or in them, and only fire nonlethal spells until you recognize your target. We don't want to accidentally hurt any of the students."

"Roger that," Sirius said, and Remus knew he was thinking of Regulus.

"Peter can join you two, just tell him what I said on the way. And James? I'll need your invisibility cloak. I'm going to sneak into the clearing to talk to Avery, and we have to hope he's willing to speak to the others."

Lily and Peter appeared then. "I told Lily what's happening," Peter chirped.

"Great. Lily..." Remus tried to figure out what she should be doing.

"Just tell her to bring a lighter, and let her do her thing," Severus said with a small smirk.

Remus relayed the message with some uncertainty, but Lily grinned. "Perfect."

They spent two minutes working out the details of their plan and pulling on shoes and finding cloaks, and then they were making their way through the tower.

"Should we let one of the professors know what's happening?" Peter asked. "Or Dumbledore?"

Lily pursed her lips, and the action looked forced, like she was trying not to scowl. "Dumbledore's not around, but we probably should tell someone. Maybe Professor McGonagall?" Lily had mentioned during their last research session that McGonagall was growing more suspicious of Dumbledore the longer he stayed away. He was replying to her letters but only with vague reassurances and little substance. Apparently McGonagall's suspicion was enough to raise Lily's opinion of her once more.

"On it." James, in an obvious attempt to impress Lily, pulled out his wand and cast a Patronus charm before anyone else could move. From Lily's gasp, it had actually worked. James whispered his message, and the stag ran off. When the spell was finished, James eyed Lily and lifted his brows. She flushed and looked away.

Once they were outside, the reality of what they were about to do slipped in. For some reason, Remus wasn't all that scared. Maybe it was because he had the support of his friends behind him again. Maybe it was just that he was finally doing something objectively good, and his usual guilt felt a bit further away. Or maybe they were walking into something they were so unprepared for that Remus didn't even know what to fear. Whatever the reason, Remus felt surprisingly confident, and the cold wind barely touched him at all.

When they entered the forest, James, Sirius, and Peter split off to the left, while the rest of them

went to the right.

“James Potter is my soulmate,” Lily whispered. Remus and Severus both looked at her like she’d grown another head.

“What?” Remus managed after a few seconds.

Lily looked agitated, and she broke a branch loudly with her next step. “His Patronus is a stag. Mine’s a doe.”

Severus rolled his eyes. “A doe and a stag aren’t even the same species.” Remus lifted a brow, so Severus sighed heavily and explained, “A stag is a red deer, and a doe isn’t. Lily’s doe specifically is a fallow deer. So they don’t belong together.”

Remus relayed this to Lily, and she said, “Oh, what a *relief*.” Then: “Wait, why do you know that?”

“I didn’t,” Remus replied with a shrug. “Severus did.”

“Ah, okay.” She didn’t ask how Severus knew that which made Remus wonder what other weird stuff Severus did that Lily wouldn’t even bat an eye at. And what weird stuff Lily did, apparently, after Severus’ bizarre ‘lighter’ comment. He decided he could puzzle all of that out after crashing the Death Eater gathering. If they made it through it, that was.

“And anyway,” Severus continued, “Patronuses and soulmates aren’t the same things. My Patronus is a doe as well, and it certainly doesn’t mean I should marry Lily. I’m not even interested in--” He cut himself off, a soft blush coloring his cheeks.

Remus stared at him, trying to decide what Severus meant. Then he realized what Severus had almost told him: he didn’t like girls. “Me neither,” Remus replied before he could talk himself out of it. He turned away without waiting for Severus’ reaction.

Lily glanced at him. “What was that?”

“Nothing.”

They fell silent as they drew near the clearing, and the wolf inside Remus itched to leave the forest for the first time in his life. Something about the woods tonight was...wrong.

“It’s like death,” Severus said, and Remus nodded. It was exactly like death, and for some reason, they were walking right into it. Fear crept in finally, and just when Remus was starting to wonder why they had thought this was a good plan, You Know Who’s voice rang out from up ahead. Lily saluted Remus and slipped out of sight, leaving Severus and Remus alone.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Remus whispered.

Severus looked at him with barely-concealed alarm, like he was dreading the pep talk he would have to give if Remus was thinking of backing out. “Crashing a Death Eater meeting?”

“No.” Remus smiled in spite of himself. “I can’t believe we’re all working together.”

Severus made an amused sound and started forward, but Remus touched his shoulder to stop him. Severus didn’t flinch, and Remus shouldn’t have been so pleased about it--the bar was *so low*. But he was pleased, and it gave him the confidence to say what he wanted to say. “Be careful?”

Severus was unimpressed. "I'm invisible. It's you who should be careful. Especially given your idiotic tendency to self-sacrifice."

Remus shook his head. "We know that spells can still hit you. I don't want you to put yourself in danger because you feel like you're invincible."

Severus gave an almost-smile that made Remus' heart skip a beat. "Worried about me, Lupin?"

"Of course," Remus said, swallowing. "We're--" What were they? Were they still anything after Remus pushed him away last week? "We're friends," he finished, voice firm despite his nerves. "I care about you."

Severus stared at him in surprise, and Remus decided he was glad he had said something. He thought Severus knew at least some of how he felt, but apparently Severus still didn't get it. There was a moment during which Remus and Severus were almost suspended in time, waiting for...something. But then Severus cleared his throat and said, "Well, there's no need to worry about me. If the Dark Lord hits me with an Unforgivable, Deeny the house-elf will show up and do...something."

Remus laughed. "Not to insult her skills, but I'm not sure that's sufficient."

"Dumbledore thinks so," Severus replied with a scoff.

"Well, in that case, I'm sure you'll be fine."

They shared smiles, but neither of them laughed. The gravity of the situation and the deadness of the woods suddenly felt too heavy for such things. Taking a deep breath, Remus pulled James' invisibility cloak over his head, and together, they walked toward the sound of You Know Who's voice.

The clearing was filled with figures in black robes, and the fully-fledged Death Eaters were hidden behind masks. As Remus walked around, trying to spot Avery amongst the hooded guests, You Know Who's voice grated on his ears.

"...and tonight, nine more loyal Death Eaters will take their place at my side."

Remus did his best to tune out that rasping voice and focus on the task before him, but he couldn't help but turn to catch a glimpse of You Know Who. The man was attractive--that was undeniable--but there was something about his eyes that felt like the deadness of the forest. Suppressing a shiver, Remus looked away. Nine masks floated in front of You Know Who, presumably for the soon-to-be-Marked.

Severus was walking through Death Eaters and students with so much surety it was like they were the ones who weren't there instead of Severus. Remus couldn't see his other friends in the surrounding forest, but he could sense their presence as they waited for their cue.

"He's over here," Severus said, speaking in a hushed voice even though no one but Remus could hear.

Remus made his way over to Avery as silently as possible. It was a slow process since, unlike Severus, Remus had to avoid touching any of the Death Eaters as he passed by. Thankfully, Avery was at the front, and it was easy to sneak up next to him without running into anyone. A Death Eater stood to Avery's right, but he was masked so Remus couldn't tell who it was. It didn't matter, he supposed. He just had to be quiet enough not to be overheard.

“Avery,” he whispered, and the Slytherin tensed. “It’s Remus Lupin. I’m here with Severus and several others. We’re going to cause a distraction, and then we need you to speak to the students here--convince them not to join the Death Eaters.”

Avery’s eyes didn’t move, nor any other part of him, and Remus figured that was a good thing since it meant he was less likely to get caught, but he’d feel more confident if he’d received some form of acknowledgment.

“They won’t listen to me,” Remus continued, “but they’ll listen to you. Just talk to them, that’s all we ask. We’ll hold off the Death Eaters in the meantime. Can you do that?”

Again, there was no acknowledgment, but Remus was afraid to say anything more. He just had to trust that Avery would make the right choice. As Remus headed back into the forest to hand off the invisibility cloak, he really hoped he hadn’t tied their chances of success to the wrong person.

Just as Remus spotted Lily, You Know Who hissed a series of phrases and retrieved a silver chalice from his cloak. Was that Parseltongue? Remus had read about it but never heard it before. He snuck behind the tree next to Lily and pulled off the cloak. She nodded to him and ducked underneath it. Remus walked around the perimeter of the clearing, careful to avoid being seen.

“Wilkes, step forward.” You Know Who smiled a snake-like smile as the Slytherin did as he was told. “Mulciber, step forward.” Mulciber did too.

Remus tried to spot James and Sirius, but they weren’t where they said they’d be. Trying not to panic, Remus ran through a list of likely scenarios in his head. Perhaps they were worried someone would see them so they moved deeper into the trees.

“Travers, step forward.”

Maybe they had decided to climb the trees instead. Remus glanced up. They weren’t there either. Had Remus told them their instructions incorrectly?

“Rosier, step forward.”

Just then, Remus saw James. Only he wasn’t in his position, and he wasn’t human. Remus glanced across the clearing, and he could just make out two glowing eyes over there as well.

“Avery, step forward.”

Remus inhaled sharply. *Shit* . He had assumed--

But of course Avery was one of the nine new Death Eaters. He was in the same year as many of the others, and he was standing in the front. Reading one book wasn’t enough to make him change his mind, because how could it be?

Before Remus could start to panic, Prongs and Padfoot stepped out into the clearing.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Severus was waiting, wand drawn, for the right moment to send his first curse when a large dog and a stag walked out of the trees. It was a bizarre sight, particularly since the whole forest seemed

dead like the other night, and Severus didn't know what to make of it. But then he thought of Potter's Patronus, and his lips twitched. Of course. That's what they were up to during the full moons. As Animagi they could be around werewolves without becoming prey. For the first time, Severus felt a hint of begrudging gratitude toward them for making sure Remus wasn't alone.

The Dark Lord stopped speaking when he spotted them, and Severus cracked up at the sight of James Potter selling the act by sticking his muzzle in the grass and nibbling. The Death Eaters and new recruits were looking between the dog and the stag uncomfortably, like they knew they should give their attention to the Dark Lord but they weren't sure what to do when he himself was distracted by the animals. It definitely changed the tone of the event.

One of the younger recruits lifted a hand to point, and Severus turned to see what she was looking at. He grinned. A disembodied hand was floating next to the Dark Lord, holding Lily's favorite lighter. Severus knew she would have already cast her flammability spell, so even if one of the Death Eaters recognized the Muggle device, it would be too late.

With a click, the Dark Lord's robes went up in flames.

Lily was a sucker for aesthetics, and fuck if Severus wasn't as well. The screaming was an added bonus. Lily's hand disappeared back under the invisibility cloak as Death Eaters rushed to help their Dark Lord, and Severus knew it was his time to act.

"*Sectumsempra!*" He'd been itching to try that one out since he designed it a few days after Remus nearly killed him. When Bellatrix LeStrange cried out in pain, he knew it was a success. He started firing curses and hexes as fast as he could, and he watched as Remus joined the battle as well. Potter and Black were fighting in their Animagus forms, with Potter charging at Death Eaters with his antlers and Black tearing at their legs with his teeth. Severus thought he even spotted a small rat biting Lucius Malfoy's finger, but Malfoy threw it off before he could get a good look.

Severus spared a glance at the students, but most of them were trembling in fear, looking around in anticipation of an invisible attack. Mulciber looked like he was ready to fight but he was waiting for someone to strike him first. Avery stared at the ground. A pang of disappointment shot through Severus, but he didn't have time to waste, so he turned back toward the Death Eaters and sent more curses flying their way.

He liked getting to test out his darkest spells without reservation, and he wondered if maybe this could be his future. Severus had never wanted to be an Auror--he'd seen enough of Muggle police, and he didn't want to be the wizard equivalent--and he didn't want to fight for Dumbledore, but this was different. This was what he'd sought after when he'd wanted to join the Death Eaters: to tear down the structures that kept people like him underneath the boots of the powerful. Now that he realized the Dark Lord was just seeking to build another world order similar to this one only more blatantly violent, Severus wanted no part in it. But he'd love to be the one to destroy it. He'd love to fight for himself, and for Lily and Remus and his fellow Slytherins. And it was so very satisfying to be able to use the Dark Arts as he did it.

Severus sent Mulciber's father flying into the air by his foot. As he fell to the ground head first, Severus took a moment to take in the scene around him. Black was dragging Rowle by his arm, and Remus stupefied several Death Eaters in succession. As the only one who was in human form and not invisible, Remus was probably dealing with the brunt of the attacks, but Potter stood guard in front of him, and other than a cut on his cheek, he looked mostly okay. Just as the Death Eaters managed to put out the Dark Lord's robes, another Death Eater mysteriously caught fire. The click got lost in the chaos--so did the screams coming from the new bonfire.

Severus was so caught up in the fact that they were *winning* that he didn't see the Dark Lord stand



up--didn't see him pull his wand, or cast the Cruciatus curse. Severus didn't realize any of that until Avery dove straight through Severus to protect Remus. Avery fell to the ground screaming and convulsing, and Severus cast another *sectumsempra*, this time at the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord hissed, and the curse ended, but he wasn't as wounded as he should have been from the curse or the fire. Severus watched as the Dark Lord took in the damage still in progress all around him, and with one last look of rage, he Disapparated with a crack. The other Death Eaters followed suit until the clearing held only a werewolf, some Animagi, and a few dozen Hogwarts students--plus two invisible kids from Cokeworth.

For a few minutes, it was mostly silent. Remus helped Avery stand, and Lily pulled off her cloak. Apparently Severus hadn't imagined the biting rat, because Pettigrew transformed back into human form, and there was blood on his face. Potter and Black stayed in their Animagus forms, and Severus was pleased that they did as they were told for once.

Then Mulciber spoke up. "What was that, Avery? Turned blood traitor on us?"

Avery glared at him, but it was weak. He was still shaking from the aftershocks of the Cruciatus Curse. "Blood purity doesn't matter," he said, and Severus wished he could stand up for him, or send him a reassuring look--anything.

"What did you just say?" Mulciber looked ready to fight a second battle, and Severus was glad he'd kept his wand out.

Avery straightened using Remus' help, and this time he addressed the whole crowd. "I said blood purity doesn't matter. Because it doesn't. You think our families are struggling to make ends meet because Muggleborns can attend Hogwarts? That's ridiculous. Muggleborns aren't the ones who have all the power. It's rich families like the Malfoys. They're the ones who run this world. Why should we help people like Lucius Malfoy maintain his power when he's never used it to help any of us?" Mulciber didn't have a response to this. No one else did either. "The Dark Lord is pitting us against Muggleborns and half-bloods so we don't realize what's really going on. If we did, we'd never fight for him. We'd fight for *us*." Remus gave Avery a pat on the shoulder, and Avery smiled at him. "Felt good to say that."

Mulciber stepped in front of the crowd. "You're not serious. Are you lot buying this?" He looked around to gauge the reactions of those around him. A few of the wealthier purebloods were looking at Avery the same way Mulciber was, but Rosier and some of the others avoided Mulciber's gaze.

Severus spotted someone pushing their way to the front and realized it was Regulus. He was so small, but he stood with the posture of someone who'd been raised by the Black family, so it was easy for him to draw everyone's attention. "I've always admired the Dark Lord because he's supposed to be so powerful and revolutionary," he paused, frowning, "but isn't it strange that he ran away like that? You're just a bunch of kids, and he looked terrified. I'm not sure I'd want to follow someone like that."

One of the Ravenclaws raised her hand like someone was going to call on her. She proceeded anyway when no one did. "Not to mention, they didn't have any qualms about *hurting* a bunch of kids. Did you see he cast the Cruciatus curse on Avery?"

Conversation broke out then amongst the entire group, and Severus lost track of where it was headed. A few of the older students were already Marked, and besides Mulciber, they seemed to be the most put-off by the turn the evening had taken. None of them pulled out their wands, however, so Severus tucked his own away. He didn't expect to convince them all right then, but Avery's speech had gone better than expected.

Just then, Lily and Avery turned toward Severus, eyes wide.

“Sev!” Lily ran to hug him. “You’re visible again.”

He exhaled in relief when she didn’t go through him. “I am.”

When she finally released him, Avery was there. Severus smiled awkwardly, and then Avery hugged him as well. Severus looked around for Remus, but he was petting Black on the head, and saying something to Pettigrew. Severus supposed his reappearance didn’t mean much to the person who could see him all along. A more pessimistic part of him pointed out that Remus had no reason to care about him anymore. Remus could go on with his life, guilt-free, knowing he’d made up for his sins by helping Severus through this difficult time. And Severus would just have to deal with that. It was what he’d expected all along, after all.

Severus turned his attention back to Lily and Avery and tried to celebrate their victory for now. Heartbreak could wait. They had just fought the Dark Lord and *won*. They had saved innocents from becoming Death Eaters, and it looked like they might just put a stopper in his recruitment altogether. Not to mention, Severus was *visible* again. He was visible, and audible, and undeniably real.

Severus smiled at Lily, so wide his cheeks hurt, and she pulled him into another hug. She was crying and laughing and holding him tight, and Severus lost himself in their embrace. He had his best friend back, he was no longer cursed, and they were alive. That was more than enough to celebrate.

## Chapter 10

Severus was sitting in Dumbledore's office, and it was strange to think about the last time he was here. Severus had been shaking, terrified, angry, visible. Now, he wasn't shaking or terrified, but he was still angry--and fortunately, visible. Dumbledore had asked Severus to wait here for him as he had something he needed to do before they spoke, and Severus considered leaving out of spite, but he didn't want Dumbledore to make him invisible again and, annoyingly enough, he was curious to hear what the Headmaster had to say.

Dumbledore had returned from his mysterious trip the moment McGonagall relayed Potter's message to him. Severus supposed that was admirable--dropping everything to help his students when it was most important--but he couldn't help feeling like a good Headmaster wouldn't have been gone so long in the first place. Maybe then he would have noticed the Dark Lord recruiting children within the walls of Hogwarts. Or maybe he would have just turned them all invisible and left the Dark Lord with an army of secret assassins. Severus still wasn't sure Dumbledore was right in the head, so guessing his motivations wasn't the most useful endeavor.

When Dumbledore finally took a seat across from Severus, he had a twinkle in his eyes. "Mr. Snape. You acted very bravely tonight."

Severus knew what he'd done--he didn't need the old bat to tell him. "Why did you curse me?"

Dumbledore's brows rose, and Severus was reminded of fuzzy white caterpillars. "Curse you? Nonsense. I haven't used a true curse in thirty years."

Severus didn't care about 'true curses'. Potter and Black had cursed him using mundane household spells in the past. Dark Magic, curses...they were subjective. Arbitrary. Unforgivables were illegal, of course, but there were spells that could do far worse that passed entirely under the legal radar. Instead of voicing any of this, Severus repeated, "Why?"

Dumbledore leaned backward, steepling his hands in front of him. "Sometimes we do things that at first seem cruel or detrimental in the name of the greater good."

"What 'greater good'? Are you trying to claim that everything only happened the way it did because you turned me invisible?" Even as the words left Severus' mouth, he started to doubt himself. *Would* he have befriended Remus if he'd had another choice? Would he have discovered the truth about the Death Eaters before it was too late? Or would he have been standing there with Avery and Mulciber in the front row? Would he now be Marked?

Dumbledore smiled at him, but it was wistful and sad rather than self-satisfied, so Severus didn't scowl in response. "It's impossible to know how things might have gone, but I stand by my choices, just as I hope you stand by yours. Do you regret rejecting Voldemort?"

Severus didn't want to tell Dumbledore about his feelings on the Death Eaters--there was no way he could understand--but he wanted to get out of this office as soon as possible. "No."

Dumbledore nodded once, like this proved some suspicion he had. "I know I haven't fully answered your question, and I doubt anything I could say would satisfactorily describe my motivations, but I will tell you this: after the full moon, I realized that both yourself and Mr. Lupin would be placed in a position of isolation—you because you were forbidden to discuss the traumatic experience you faced, and Mr. Lupin because he had just been betrayed by his closest friend. I worried you would self-isolate, so I created a situation in which you would be urged to find companionship and understanding in each other."

As angry as Severus still was about the way Dumbledore had uprooted his life, he could at least understand the motivation behind it--even if he still thought the Headmaster's means were heinous and unjust.

Dumbledore peered at him over his half-moon spectacles. "Do you wish I hadn't?"

Severus opened his mouth to say 'yes', but then he thought of Remus--of his smile and his laugh and how warm he was when they hugged. He thought of Lily, and how their friendship had been slipping away, almost without him realizing it, until they had needed to fight for it, and now it was stronger than ever. He thought of Avery, who before this whole situation, Severus wouldn't have even considered a real friend--perhaps an acquaintance or a strategic ally--but who had noticed, when no one else did, that Severus was there. And when he considered all of that, suddenly the answer to Dumbledore's question wasn't so easy.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled in the silence, and before Severus could tell him to cut it out, Dumbledore said, "You are free to go, Mr. Snape."

"He said *what*?" Lily sat up from where she had been lying with her head in Severus' lap. They used to sit like this when they were younger, but at some point in the past few years, they had stopped, and Severus couldn't remember why. It was easy to understand why they returned to the practice now, however. Each point of contact made the memory of Lily's hand passing through his feel further and further away.

Severus pulled his cloak tighter around himself, colder now that Lily wasn't serving as a blanket. The air was probably below freezing, but Lily had told him to meet her before breakfast so they could rehash what happened during his meeting with Dumbledore. Why it needed to happen *outside* was a mystery to Severus.

Lily had wanted to wait up for him last night, but Severus saw the tiredness in her frame and decided they both needed to sleep. Lily had lifted an eyebrow at the excuse, knowing Severus' insomnia would keep him awake if the threat of retaliation from his Dark Lord-following roommates didn't, but Severus refused to admit she was right.

When it became clear Severus wasn't going to budge, Lily said, "I'm afraid if I let you out of my sight, you'll disappear again."

Severus knew her fear was reflected in his own eyes, but he had to believe that wasn't going to happen. "I won't."

"I don't trust him." She eyed the staircase to Dumbledore's office. "You shouldn't have to be alone with him."

Severus didn't want to be alone with him either, but he had questions he needed answered, and if Lily came with him, he wouldn't be able to get them. He loved Lily, but there was a time and a place for her righteous anger. Namely, before breakfast. It was his favorite time for a Lily rant. "We'll talk tomorrow, first thing."

Lily hesitated for a moment longer before wrapping him in a tight hug and speaking into his ear, "Meet me on the castle grounds. Wear something warm!"

Severus was glad for his decision to hold Lily off until morning. There was a part of him, no matter how much he distrusted and despised the man, who agreed with Dumbledore—because Severus doubted himself. He *wasn't* sure that things would have turned out better if Dumbledore had never cursed him, and he needed time to consider the possibility that they wouldn't have. To consider what he would have lost if he had joined the Death Eaters. But he was also more than grateful for Lily for squashing those unpleasant thoughts with her indignation. It made Severus smile, and it reminded him that Dumbledore was still in the wrong, regardless of the 'greater good.'

When Severus shivered again, a small *pop* sounded a few feet away.

"Deeny is at your service, sir!"

The tiny voice was muffled, and Severus looked up to see, not a house-elf like he'd been expecting, but a moving lump of blankets.

"Er...Deeny?" Severus said, wondering what had happened to the poor creature. Lily smothered her giggles against his shoulder. As they watched, the blankets wriggled and a head popped out.

"Mister Snape is cold, so Deeny has brought blankets!"

Severus watched as the house-elf dumped the enormous pile of cloth on his lap. "That's very nice of you, Deeny, but I'm visible now. Surely Dumbledore no longer expects you to follow me around?"

Deeny shook her head so quickly her ears nearly smacked her in the face. "Deeny is here because she wants to be, sir! Deeny likes Mister Snape and does not want him to freeze."

Severus could feel Lily's grin, and he huffed affectionately at the house-elf. "Thank you, Deeny. I really appreciate it."

"You is very welcome, sir!" And then Deeny was gone with another *pop*.

After spreading several blankets across their legs, there were still some left, so Lily fished out an especially large one and tossed it over their heads. It reminded Severus of the blanket forts they would make when they were little and Severus would come over to Lily's house. Once they had neatly tucked the edges of the blanket under themselves so no cold air could get in, Lily cast a *lumos* and returned to the topic of Dumbledore.

"We have to tell McGonagall," she said, no longer looking at Severus as she started to plot. "Remus will back you up, and I bet some of the Slytherins would as well."

Severus ignored the pain that shot through him at the mention of Remus, and instead pictured an incensed Deeny confronting Dumbledore on Severus' behalf. "And then what?" Severus said. He enjoyed Lily's certainty, even if he didn't think anything would come of her endeavor.

"And then McGonagall will support our demand that Dumbledore is removed from the school, of course," Lily said, as if it was obvious. Maybe it was. Severus thought it sounded extreme and



implausible, but Lily was usually right, and she wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted.

So Severus let her plot, nodding and smiling and asking questions whenever she paused. She settled back into his lap after a while, and Severus had to hold the blanket up with his arms to keep it from covering her face. As she spoke about how unfair and cruel Dumbledore had been to him, Severus started to believe her. He stopped worrying about what might have happened if Dumbledore hadn't stepped in, because there was no knowing for certain. Instead, he reminded himself how scared and alone he had felt, which wasn't as nauseating now that he was content and less alone than he had ever been before. He reminded himself of the panic attacks and the nightmares and the lengths he had gone to in order to feel real.

After spending so much time believing no one would stand up for him and nothing would change, Severus had let his anger simmer down to resentment, resignation, and bitterness. But Lily had never had any patience for the impossible, and he started to believe maybe she was right to demand justice. Maybe with friends supporting him, he could finally afford to be angry.

Later that day, Lily and Remus met with McGonagall. Avery went as well, even though McGonagall wasn't his Head of House, in order to provide a Slytherin perspective. Severus chose not to go. He didn't want to talk about Dumbledore or see McGonagall's expression when they told her the truth, either unsympathetic if she picked Dumbledore's side or pitying if she didn't. He heard about it afterward though.

Students who were in the Great Hall at the end of lunch quickly spread word throughout the rest of the school about the confrontation that supposedly took place. Some said McGonagall turned Dumbledore into a coat rack while others said it was a wiry Muggle lamp.

Lily had rolled her eyes when Severus asked her about it. "You know how McGonagall feels about using Transfiguration as a punishment. She probably just demanded that he resign or something. Or maybe she fired him. Does she have the power to do that?"

Whatever happened, the next day, Dumbledore was no longer at Hogwarts, and McGonagall was promoted to Headmistress within the week. Whispers abounded about the additions of both a coat rack *and* a lamp to what was once Dumbledore's office, only strengthening the convictions of those who subscribed to the Transfiguration theory.

Every now and then, Severus heard a different theory. McGonagall and Mrs. Norris teamed up to scratch Dumbledore with their cat claws until he was forced to leave. Dumbledore was chased out of the school by Hogwarts itself, the suits of armor and statues coming to life to battle the old Headmaster. McGonagall killed him with Avada Kedavra, but the Ministry approved, so they didn't take her to Azkaban. Some of the Slytherins even decided the Chamber of Secrets had opened and taken revenge against the anti-Slytherin Headmaster.

Severus stopped listening to them after a while, but his ears perked when he heard someone suggest that McGonagall had cursed Dumbledore to be invisible and inaudible, and that he was forced to roam the school in that state for the rest of eternity. It was just as unlikely as the others, but Severus liked the poetic justice of it.

Interestingly, few people asked *why* Dumbledore had been deposed. Perhaps they trusted that McGonagall had good reason. Or perhaps they all knew there was something a little...off about the old wizard. A little cruel, a little prejudiced, a little manipulative. Severus heard people talk for the first time about his past with Grindelwald--heard them wonder if Dumbledore was secretly a Slytherin--but Severus mostly heard that from Gryffindors, as if they needed to blame some past

evil or distance themselves from him in order to believe he was capable of bad things. The Slytherins never spoke of Grindelwald, and they certainly never claimed Dumbledore as one of their own--the Gryffindors could keep him.

In truth, Severus agreed with Lily that the most likely scenario was that Dumbledore had been fired or chose to resign--that he was out there somewhere, waiting in the shadows until he could build an army to fight the Dark Lord.

"He should never have been put in charge of a school," Lily said, "but I don't think he's all bad. I think he cares about defeating You Know Who, probably even more so if the rumors about Grindelwald are true. He wouldn't just stop fighting because of this."

Still, it was amusing to imagine the plethora of ways McGonagall could have disposed of the ex-Headmaster. The students started referring to Dumbledore as 'the old coat rack' when they spoke of him, and Severus didn't hesitate to join in.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

A week passed, and the uncomfortable thing was that life was almost back to normal. Other than Dumbledore being replaced as Headmaster, things were relatively the same. Remus had decided to give Sirius another chance, and he was officially talking to James and Peter again, so the Marauders were back together and it seemed almost like there had never been a rift in the first place. There were differences, of course. Lily was no longer opposed to associating with them, so that was new, and James and Sirius had reluctantly agreed to apologize to Severus and stop bullying, which was too little too late but good all the same.

After everything Remus had been through since that fateful full moon, however, he kind of thought things would...change...in a more dramatic way. He thought that there would be more inter-House solidarity, or that Severus would talk to him in the halls. That their actions in the Forbidden Forest would spark the revolution Hopkins wrote about, or that Severus would talk to him at all.

He really wished Severus would stop pretending he didn't exist. A couple of times, Remus had even considered the possibility that the reverse of Severus' condition was happening to him, where everyone but Severus could see him. But then he decided that was ridiculous because Remus didn't need to be invisible for Severus to not want to see him. Severus had needed him, and now he didn't. That was all. And Remus would be okay with that. Eventually. At least, he hoped he would. It was looking less and less promising as the days went by and Remus still couldn't keep his eyes from finding Severus in the Great Hall, in Potions class, in the hallways, in the library.

Remus was in the library now, trying to focus on his reading, but he could see Severus from where he was sitting, so his efforts were futile. He wondered if things were different in Slytherin. Was it dangerous now that so many students had changed loyalties and made their feelings on You Know Who clear? Or were people like Severus and Avery and Regulus helping to change the minds of those who continued to follow him?

Before Remus could decide whether he should keep intermittently staring at Severus or head back to the common room to complete his work, Lily dropped her bag down beside the chair across from his.

"So," she said in absence of a greeting. "I've decided it's time to move on from my crush on

Severus.”

Remus pretended to be uninterested. “Oh?”

“Mm-hm,” Lily hummed, playing with her tie.

Remus tapped his fingers on the pages, trying to understand her angle. She could really be quite Slytherin sometimes. “You’ve got your eye on someone else?”

“No...” She drew out the word, and Remus wanted to tell her to just spit it out already. But that would be uncalled for, because Remus was Calm. Friendly. *Rational*. At least, he used to be. “But I think Severus does,” she finished.

Remus lowered his eyes to his book, hoping Lily couldn’t see the way his thoughts were racing. *Now that he’s visible again, he has more options. You were just the stand-in. But you know that, so you can’t get upset about it now.*

“Well,” Lily said, “that, and he’s gay.”

Remus looked up at her in surprise. “You know?”

Lily sighed exasperatedly. “Of course I know. I can see him staring at you when you’re not looking.”

“He...he does that?” Remus didn’t want to get his hopes up without reason, but he desperately wanted it to be true.

“Yes! And don’t you dare pretend you’re not doing the exact same thing, because I’ve seen it. The only person watching either of you more than each other is me,” Lily said with a wrinkle of her nose, “which now that I’m saying it aloud is a bit creepy. But it’s only because I care about you, and I want you both to be happy.”

Remus smiled after a slight hesitation. “Okay. So...what should I do?”

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

When Severus received a letter from Remus asking to meet, his first thought was to panic--Remus had probably noticed him staring and was going to tell him to stop being a pervert. His second thought was, wow, Remus had terrible handwriting; someone should really help him out with that. And his third thought was *Why is Lily smirking at me like that?* When she then proceeded to tilt her head toward Remus and make suggestive eyebrow wiggles, Severus’ fourth thought sprung to mind which was that he was glad Avery was his friend now since Lily had to go. She knew too much. His fifth thought was *Maybe it won’t be so bad. At least it means he’ll talk to you again, even if it’s the last time.*

And his final thought on the matter was that he was pathetic. Absolutely pathetic. But then again, that thought was always floating somewhere in the background anyway, so he wasn’t sure it counted.

Remus told him to meet in the library, and Severus figured that was a good sign since at least Remus wasn’t planning on yelling at him or hexing him. The letter was brief, so it was hard to read

anything from the tone, but Severus wondered if there was something he could ascertain from its brevity.

“You alright?” Avery asked from his spot to Severus’ right.

Severus didn’t quite know how to answer. “Um.”

“Is it about Lupin?”

Severus whirled on him with wide eyes. “Who told you?”

Avery looked at him warily like he was afraid Severus would curse him but not enough to move or block. “He’s just been staring at you since your letter arrived, that’s all.”

“Oh.” Severus was being paranoid, which he would argue was warranted after Lily made all those faces at him. “Yes, it’s from him.”

“I thought you two were friends, but I haven’t seen you hanging out together lately,” Avery remarked. “I’ve been avoiding him too out of solidarity, just in case.”

Severus liked that Avery was using words like ‘solidarity’ now, even if he wasn’t sure avoiding Remus was the kind of solidarity that would change the world. “You don’t have to avoid him,” Severus said, and he didn’t know how to say anything else without telling everything, and Severus didn’t want to test Avery’s solidarity by outing himself.

Avery nodded and went back to his food. Lily, on the other hand, sent Severus ‘thumbs up’ and other mysterious gestures every time he looked over. Severus really preferred Slytherins sometimes.

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus’ heart was beating wildly in his chest. Severus had shown up--he had *actually* shown up. Hoping the gesture wouldn’t scare him off immediately, Remus pulled out the chair beside him. Severus eyed it suspiciously for a moment, but he ultimately sat.

And then stared.

And lifted a brow.

And Remus didn’t know what to say.

“I miss you,” he finally tried.

Severus was tugging at his fingers. The movement looked habitual, and Remus wondered why he hadn’t noticed it as much while he was cursed. But Severus’ shoulders were also hunched, and his eyes darted around the room, so maybe Remus just wasn’t used to a Severus who was visible. Invisible Severus had been confident because nothing could touch him. He’d worn Muggle clothes and tied his hair back and walked into rooms like he owned the place. He’d stolen James’ broom and started a revolt and kissed Remus. Remus wished he knew how to give this Severus that confidence.

“I miss talking to you,” Remus continued, “and hugging you, and seeing you smile. I miss staying

in the library with you until curfew and hearing you talk about magical theories and sleeping with you in my bed.”

Severus was looking up now, his face open and...hopeful? Or maybe Remus was projecting. But Severus wasn't tugging at his fingers anymore, so he kept going.

“I know you only agreed to be my friend because you couldn't be with Lily or Avery or the other Slytherins, but I'd like you to still be in my life--I'd like you to be a big part of my life, if I'm being honest--if you'll still have me?”

Severus opened his mouth and closed it, furrowed his brows and then unfurrowed them. “I thought you...” Severus cleared his throat. “I thought you were only my friend because you felt responsible for helping me. And then you--after we...”

Remus felt his throat tighten. “I'm sorry for that. I didn't mean to push you away--not like that. I was just worried you only wanted me because you couldn't touch anyone else. I didn't want to somehow take advantage of you.”

Severus scoffed. “I practically threw myself on you. How in Merlin's name were *you* worried about taking advantage of *me* ?”

Remus laughed somewhat bitterly. “Because I wanted you, and...” He shrugged. “And I hate myself. So when you reciprocated, the only thing that made sense to me was that the spell was making you do things you wouldn't ordinarily do, and that felt wrong.”

Severus flushed. “The spell didn't...because I still, erm--”

Remus' breath caught in his chest. “You do?”

Severus ducked his head, and he was tugging at his fingers again. “I--”

Remus took Severus' hands in his, and they stopped tugging. “I still do, too.” Remus lifted Severus' hand and pressed his lips to his knuckles. Severus watched, eyes bright, and when Remus released his hand, he stood slowly and came to sit on Remus' lap. Remus was sure he was glowing with happiness. Severus' wrinkled nose confirmed it.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked, blushing under Remus' gaze.

Remus shrugged, unable to stop smiling. “I'm just happy I'm allowed to look at you now.”

Severus scoffed. “As if you weren't doing it before. I've felt your eyes on me all week.”

Remus flushed. “I was that obvious, huh?”

“Mm-hm,” Severus hummed. “I was much more subtle.”

Remus couldn't help but laugh. He hadn't expected Severus to admit to that. “Lily noticed.”

“Lily doesn't count. She notices everything--she's been watching me like a hawk now that she can see me again. I think she's still afraid I'm going to disappear.”

“Even though Dumbledore is a coat rack?” Remus teased.

Severus laughed, but there was still a touch of fear in his eyes at the thought of disappearing. Now that they were on the same page, he seemed sure of himself in other ways though, like he had when he was invisible. Remus was glad that Severus felt comfortable enough around him to be like that



again.

Severus leaned forward, pressing his cheek against Remus' in the way Remus had now come to associate with Severus. Remus liked it--liked the way it felt soft and warm and ambiguous, like it could lead to a kiss or it could just be this touch and that was enough.

"I think I'm kind of in love with you," Remus said in Severus' ear--another benefit of cheek-touching.

Severus exhaled softly through his nose and nuzzled his way over until their foreheads were touching. "I think I'm kind of in love with you, too. Salazar knows why." He sounded so annoyed with himself that Remus couldn't help but laugh.

And then their lips met, and somehow the rest of them was touching too as they pressed impossibly closer together. Remus was pleased to find that Severus was just like that, even when he wasn't using Remus as his tether to reality.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

Severus ended up telling Avery a few days later. They were studying together in the library, as they had taken to doing more frequently now that Mulciber wasn't talking to either of them. Although it was strange seeing Slytherin split down the middle, it was good, too. There had always been a split, but now they could talk about it--now they had a chance to change people's minds.

Regulus, Avery, Rosier, Severus, and a few others from various years were discussing the prospect of starting a radical reading group within Slytherin, but Regulus mentioned it might be good to involve the other Houses too. Severus wondered if Regulus had hopes of reconciling with his brother or if he simply wanted to include the Ravenclaw boy Crouch he was clearly crushing on. When Rosier voiced his opposition to the idea, Avery pointed out that Remus was the one who had found Hopkins' book to begin with, so it made sense to include him. Rosier seemed to think that was fair, but Severus knew he would be eyeing the Gryffindors with suspicion.

The first meeting was to be later this week, and Lily and Remus were planning to meet Severus and Avery in the library to decide on a neutral location. Knowing they would arrive in a few minutes, Severus was determined to tell Avery about Remus.

"Before they show up," Severus said, wondering if this was a horrible idea, "I thought I should let you know that Remus and I..."

Avery looked at him, probably concerned by Severus' embarrassed choking or the unnatural color his face had turned. He sent Severus a smile. "I kind of figured that was the case. It doesn't bother me."

Severus stared at Avery for several seconds before the words started to make sense in his brain. That was almost...too *easy*. Not that Severus was complaining. Clearing his throat of the emotion that had collected there, Severus nodded once and turned back to his book, grateful he didn't have to say anything more.

He had really grown to like Avery over the past couple of weeks. Although Severus had always spoken to his Slytherin friends and spent time with them, he had never treated them the way he treated Lily. He wasn't open with them because he had to pretend in order to belong. Afraid to

show any hint of his family background, he mostly kept to himself, and when he was with others, it was a performance more than time spent with friends. Until recently, he hadn't realized how much everyone else was pretending too. Avery had always seemed plain and uninteresting, but he had a good sense of humor, and he was loyal and matter-of-fact. Severus was glad he had gotten to see that after all these years.

When Remus arrived a few moments later, he asked the question with his eyes: *Did you tell him?*

Severus nodded and pulled out the chair beside him. Smiling, Remus sat and took his hand. Severus glared at the point of contact, even as he intertwined their fingers.

After scribbling one last sentence, Avery tucked away his homework. "Hi, Lupin." He didn't stare at their hands, but he didn't look like he was intentionally ignoring them either. It seemed like he really was okay with them being together. Severus felt a tension leave his shoulders.

Lily showed up then, setting a heavy book down on the table with a thump. "Hello lovebirds," she greeted, smirking at their twin blushes before turning to greet their other companion. "Avery." Still standing, she flipped the book open to a page she had marked with her wand. When Remus darted out a hand to insert one of his mysterious bookmarks, Lily nodded her thanks and tucked her wand away. A proud smile graced her face as she spun the book around to face them. "Have you ever heard of the Room of Requirement?"

x\*x\*Remus\*x\*x

Remus was sitting on the floor of his dormitory, playing a round of Exploding Snap with the Marauders. It was strange, still, spending time with them--and at other times it was strange that it wasn't strange at all. Containing their pranks to harmless and silly tricks that didn't hurt anyone was a lot harder than they had thought. When Remus made his demands, the others had quickly agreed if it meant Remus would stop ignoring them. It made Remus happy to know his friends cared about him that much--even if it was likely that James was equally motivated by Lily's similar request.

Now that they were actually attempting to follow through on that vow, however, it was proving to be difficult. What did they actually like to do together? When they weren't plotting against the Slytherins or hexing younger students? Sirius had a constant restlessness about him that only disappeared when he was on the Quidditch Pitch, and even Remus had to admit that they needed a new hobby, and fast.

Exploding Snap was already losing its excitement, and the game quickly devolved into Peter and Sirius competing to create a bigger explosion while James and Remus worked on adding the Room of Requirement to the Marauder's Map.

"Oi, Remus," James asked suddenly. Remus glanced up from his list of measurements. It had been difficult to measure the Room since it changed sizes, but he was pretty sure he had figured out its general bounds. James was still studying the Map as he spoke. "If Snape wasn't trying to curse you, what was he doing in your bed that night?"

Remus fell into a spontaneous coughing fit that had absolutely nothing to do with the question he'd just been asked. Unfortunately, it didn't last long enough to distract his friends from the topic. In fact, all of them were looking at him now.

“Erm, well--” Remus didn’t know how to proceed. It was one thing for his friends to agree to stop bullying Severus, but it would be a lot harder for them to accept that Remus was dating him. He hadn’t even told the Marauders that he liked blokes. They were waiting patiently for his answer which only made it worse. The fact that the truth didn’t even register as a possibility in their heads was not a good sign. But he had to tell them sometime, and Remus supposed now was as good a moment as any. “You all know that I’ve been spending a lot of time with him.” They nodded. “And um, er...” How did people do this? Remus wanted to crawl under his bed and hide. He wished he was an Animagus so he could just transform and refuse to turn back. That way, he couldn’t answer their difficult questions or struggle to come out to his friends. Sirius used that technique all the time, and Remus had never been more jealous. “I’m seeing Severus,” he blurted out finally.

Peter frowned at him. “We can all see him now.”

“No, I mean--we’re dating.” When he received three blank stares, Remus continued awkwardly, “You know, like holding hands and--”

The castle Sirius had been building out of cards exploded. “I’m sorry, *what?*” Sirius looked like he was being strangled.

Remus felt fear jolt through him. This was a mistake. This was a terrible, terrible mistake, and his friends were going to hate him forever. Merlin, what if they started bullying Severus again because of Remus? He didn’t think he could bear it if the Marauders started throwing around slurs or--

“*Severus Snape* lets you *hold his hand*?” Sirius asked, and that’s when Remus realized he wasn’t angry. He was laughing. “I’m sorry, I just can’t--that’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard--”

Remus was flushing to his ears. “I don’t get what’s so funny about it.” Remus looked to Peter, who still looked confused about what dating was, and then to James, who was starting to crack up as well.

“Does he...” Sirius had to pause to breathe through his giggles. “Does he scowl at you the whole time?”

Remus stammered, “Well, yes--I mean, some of the time.” It was actually really cute, but Remus didn’t want to say that. He was still a bit baffled by what was happening right now.

“I bet...I bet he’s a cuddler, too,” Sirius added, grinning at James as they both howled with laughter. “He tries so hard to look evil and Dark Arts-y, but secretly, he just wants hugs.” When Remus tried to respond that Severus *did* know a lot about the Dark Arts and he would probably use them if he found out about this conversation, Sirius held up a hand. “No, no, please...just...just let me have this.”

Remus rolled his eyes, a smile playing at his lips. There was no use in trying to stop them when they got like this.

When the laughter finally died down, Peter blinked and asked, “Wait...is Snape a girl?”

James cuffed him on the back of the head. “No, you wanker.”

Peter rubbed the back of his head. “I’m confused.”

Remus took pity on him. “Severus is a boy. I...I’m...” He couldn’t make himself say the word. It still made his stomach twist. “I’m not interested in girls like that,” he said instead.

Peter considered this, and then shrugged. “Alright.”

“Yeah?” Remus asked, voice shakier than he intended. “You’re all...okay with it?”

James placed a hand on his shoulder, smiling. “Of course we are, mate.”

The other two nodded in agreement, and Remus felt warm all over.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “I...that really means a lot to me.”

Before the moment could get too sappy, James clapped his hands together. “Now, since we know that you’re not interested in Evans, and evidently, Snape isn’t either, I have no competition.”

Remus snorted. “Besides the rest of the school.”

“And how do you know Lily doesn’t like girls?” Peter taunted, already on board with the new possibility Remus had introduced him to.

Sirius grinned. “I bet Evans already knew about Snape and Moony, so nothing’s changed on her end. She still thinks you’re an arrogant arse.”

“Oi! I’ll have you know that just yesterday she told me I was very modest!”

“Was she being sarcastic?” Peter asked.

“...maybe.”

Remus blinked away the tears that sprung to his eyes when he smiled. His friends had accepted him, just like they had all those years ago when they found out his other secret. It gave him hope that even though they had all done horrible things, there was a foundation of goodness to build upon. They were growing and learning together, and eventually, things might just be okay.

x\*x\*Severus\*x\*x

The first meeting of their radical reading group was coming to a close, although it probably needed a new title since reading wasn’t the only thing they were planning on doing. Now that the Gryffindors were involved, they wanted to add defense training to prepare for the war against the Dark Lord. *Voldemort*, Severus corrected. Rosier had pointed out that they probably shouldn’t call him the Dark Lord anymore.

Once the Gryffindors’ suggestion was accepted and taken into account, the Slytherins proposed that Dark Arts training take place as well. At first, that didn’t go over well. Accusations and insults flew until one of the Ravenclaw explained that the Dark Arts was an arbitrary category, and a Hufflepuff added that it would probably be good, at the very least, to know what they were up against.

After that, things went smoothly, and Severus looked around the room, feeling confident for the first time that this was actually going to work. There were purebloods and half-bloods and Muggleborns in attendance, and students from every House. Working-class wizards had shown up, along with wealthy purebloods like Potter and both Black brothers. There were around thirty students in total even though this was only the first meeting. And somehow, they managed to mostly get along. It helped that Deeny appeared halfway through with snacks, making everyone a little more amenable to compromise.

Avery and Remus had worked together to find a spell to duplicate Hopkins' book, so they passed around a copy to everyone--sometimes even a few copies if a student thought they could get a friend to read it--before disbanding with a plan to meet next week at the same time to start training. When only a few students lingered--mostly their friends--Remus slipped over to stand behind Severus, and Severus leaned into him.

"That went better than expected," Remus said, wrapping his arms around his torso and tucking Severus' head under his chin.

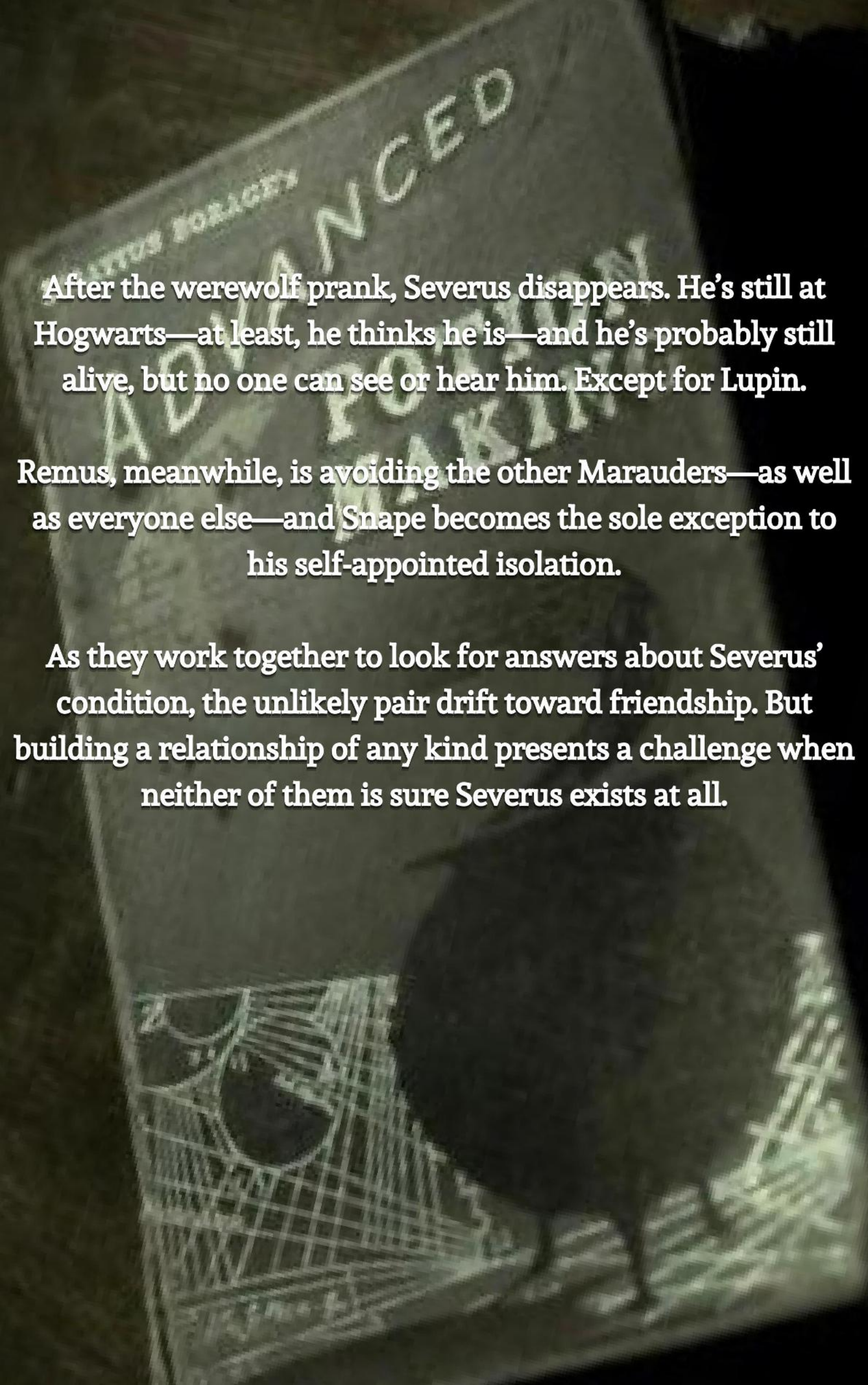
Severus hummed in agreement. He remembered how lost he had felt after discovering the truth about the Death Eaters, but he didn't feel lost now. He felt warm and happy and proud--proud of all they had accomplished already and everything they planned to do. The future he'd dreamed of was bright, and possible, and *real*. Severus was real, too, and for the first time since the curse had broken, he wasn't afraid he would disappear again. He closed his eyes and pulled Remus' arms, warm and solid, tighter around him. A smile fluttered across his lips, and Severus didn't try to cover it with a scowl.

*I'm real, Remus is real, the future we're building is real.*

This time, it wasn't a plea or a desperate whisper but an affirmation. A celebration. A fact. Severus was glad that his world finally made sense--more sense than it had ever made before--and that he had friends to share it with.

The Death Eaters were still out there, preparing for a war, and a bloody one at that. But the resistance was here too, and growing stronger every day. And Severus had finally found a cause worth fighting for.





After the werewolf prank, Severus disappears. He's still at Hogwarts—at least, he thinks he is—and he's probably still alive, but no one can see or hear him. Except for Lupin.

Remus, meanwhile, is avoiding the other Marauders—as well as everyone else—and Snape becomes the sole exception to his self-appointed isolation.

As they work together to look for answers about Severus' condition, the unlikely pair drift toward friendship. But building a relationship of any kind presents a challenge when neither of them is sure Severus exists at all.